Health crisis looms as life expectancy soars

LEVEL TWO - INTERMEDIATE

1   Pre-reading

Before reading the text, try to answer these questions:

1. What was the life expectancy for males in Britain in 1901?

    a. 60   b. 68   c. 48

2. What was the life expectancy for males in Britain in 2000?

    a. 80   b. 75   c. 65

3. When is female life expectancy in the USA expected to be more than 100 years?

    a. 2010   b. 2040   c. 2070

4. What chance has a female baby born this year in France or Japan of reaching the age of 100?

    a. a 10% chance   b. a 25% chance   c. a 50% chance

5. In the 1880s what percentage of the population died before the age of 5?

    a. 25%   b. 35%   c. 45%

6. What is the maximum current lifespan?

    a. 110   b. 122   c. 129

7. What does a demographer study?

    a. health   b. population   c. maps

Now read the text and check your answers.

A group of scientists warned last week that Western governments are seriously underestimating how long their citizens are likely to live. This could cause problems for the health, welfare and pensions systems of the developed world. Until recently only a few specialist demographers knew that governments were under-estimating life expectancy. But the latest report on increasing average lifespans will be difficult to ignore. For many years scientists have been advising governments that the increases in life expectancy over the past century, which saw typical British male lifespans rise from 48 years in 1901 to 75 years in 2000, and those of females from 49 to 80 years, will not continue. In the journal Science last week, however, two scientists from Cambridge and Rostock in Germany state that life expectancy will probably go on increasing.

By comparing differences in life expectancy between the world's wealthier countries, they conclude that as early as 2070 female life expectancy in the United States could be as high as 101 years. The official US forecast for 2070 is only 83.9 years. James Vaupel of the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research in Rostock, believes that a typical female baby born this year in France or Japan - the two countries with the greatest life expectancy - already has a 50/50 chance of living to be 100. The Science paper gives no forecasts for Britain, but using the same methodology, female life expectancy in Japan would reach 100 in 2060, and would reach 100 in Britain in 2085.

If this is true, the study has implications not just for pensions but for healthcare and social services, since there is no guarantee that average healthspan - the time people are free of chronic illness – will also rise together with average lifespan. Government figures show that for men, life expectancy went up from 70.9 to 74.6 between 1981 and 1997, but healthy life expectancy went up from 64.4 to 66.9.

A British MP has called for increased retirement ages. "If you look at life expectancy in 1948 when the state pension was introduced, and take that as a reasonable length of time to receive a pension, you would have a retirement age of 74 today instead of 65," he said.

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Life expectancy is an average figure. In the 1880s many people lived to their 60s and 70s, but almost a quarter of those born died before they were five. The maximum lifespan that any human being has lived is currently 122. During the 20th century a number of scientists declared absolute limits to life expectancy. In 1928 the US demographer, Louis Dublin, said that it was unlikely to be more than 64.75 years. In 1990 demographers said it would never be more than 85 years . Six years later, however, life expectancy for Japanese women passed this figure.

The official lower forecasts affect people's decisions about how much to save, and when to retire. They also enable politicians to postpone difficult decisions about social security and medical care systems. Professor Alan Walker of Sheffield University, said the paper's conclusions were not news to him but governments were not confronting these problems. "Politicians are now just beginning to recognise the potential significance of increased life expectancy" he said.

The Guardian Weekly 16-5-2002, page 11

2   True or False?

	TRUE	FALSE
1. Western governments have over-estimated life expectancy.	☐	☐
2. Typical British male lifespans rose by 27 years in the 20th century.	☐	☐
3. The official US forecast for 2070 is higher than the forecast in the latest report.	☐	☐
4. According to the report, one in two female babies born this year in Japan will reach the age of 100.	☐	☐
5 Female life expectancy in Britain should reach 100 by 2085.	☐	☐
6. Healthy life expectancy is lower than life expectancy.	☐	☐
7. The retirement age is not in step with increasing life expectancy.	☐	☐
8. Almost 25% of the population died before the age of 5 in the 1880s.	☐	☐
9. No-one lived beyond the age of 48 in 1901.	☐	☐
10.Male life expectancy in Japan reached 85 in 1996.	☐	☐

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3   Vocabulary work

Use one of the words from the text to fill the gaps in these sentences:

1. If you think something is smaller or less important than it really is, you _____ it.

2. If you _____ something, you do not consider it or pay attention to it.

3. Another word for 'richer' is _____ .

4. A _____ is a kind of prediction.

5. An _____ is a possible effect or result.

6. If an illness is very serious, it can be described as _____ .

7. The income you receive from the state after you have retired is called a _____ .

8. A polite word for an old person is an _____ person.

9. If you put off or delay something, you _____ it.

4   Vocabulary work – prepositions

Fill the gaps using an appropriate preposition:

1. Underestimating life expectancy could cause serious problems _____ social services.

2. It will be difficult to ignore the latest report _____ increasing life expectancy.

3. A female child in Japan has a 50% chance _____ living to the age of 100.

4. The report has implications _____ pensions and social services.

5. A British MP has called _____ a new committee to be set up.

6. In the 1880s, almost 25% of the population died _____ the age of 5.

7. Previously, scientists thought there was an absolute limit _____ life expectancy.

8. _____ the 20th century many scientists declared absolute limits.

9. Governments are not facing up _____ these problems.

10. The government needs to adapt _____ this sort of finding.

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LEVEL TWO - INTERMEDIATE

5   Reported Speech.

Use some of the reporting verbs from the text to fill in the gaps. Do not use say.

Scientists in Berlin a) _____ that global warming will soon create vast deserts around the world. The scientists b) _____ that transport systems using fossil fuels will all need to be replaced eventually. Boris Doppelganger c) _____ "Now is the time to start changing, we cannot wait until the seas have submerged half of the planet while the other half becomes desert to reverse the effects"

Other scientists, commissioned by energy companies, dispute these claims. John Smith from the Corporate Insititute d) _____calm and proper investigation in our analysis of the problems. His figures e) _____ that the current steady increase in sea temperatures is part of a normal cycle of rising temperatures.

6   Discussion

Advances in medicine and gene technology could mean that people could live to the age of 150, even 200. Perhaps they could even live indefinitely. Make a list of the advantages and disadvantages of living a longer life. What changes would this bring to human society? What would happen to the world if there were more and more people being born and fewer and fewer people dying?

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KEY

1   Pre-reading

1 c   2 b   3 c   4 c   5 a   6 b   7 b

2   True or False

1 F   2 T   3 F   4 T   5 T   6 T   7 T   8 T   9 F   10 F

3   Vocabulary work

1. underestimate
2. ignore
3. wealthier
4. forecast
5. implication
6. chronic
7. pension
8. elderly
9. postpone

4   Prepositions

1. for
2. on
3. of
4. for
5. for
6. before
7. to
8. during (or 'in')
9. to
10. to

5   Reported speech.

Suggested answers

a) Warn
b) Believes
c) Commented
d) Called for
e) Show