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Ageing with dignity

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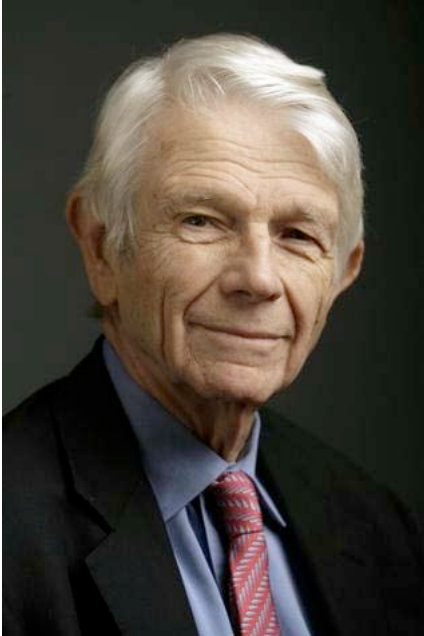


Photo: AP Dr. Robert Butler: Ageing with dignity.

Remembering Dr. Robert Butler, Pulitzer Prize-winning longevity expert, and a champion of older people who died recently. He will be remembered as the epitome of aging with dignity, grace and good health, a role model for younger gerontologists and his fans growing by the years. He was a practitioner of all that he prescribed.

On the evening of June 28, I, like many other professional friends of Robert Butler, received an e-mail from International Longevity Center-USA (ILC-USA). Its founder and current president and CEO, Butler's new book *The Longevity Prescription: The 8 Proven Keys to A Long, Healthy Life* had been published by Avery Publishing Group in May 2010. Before I could absorb the strengths of his latest addition to a list of over 15 books from 1963 onwards, offering a revitalising plan for reaping the rich rewards of the final third of life, I heard the news of his death due to leukaemia.

The first reaction for many of us, associated with him through our work and friendship, as we quickly sent emails, SMS to each other sharing the sad news, was, "Not Butler, the name synonymous with healthy ageing." Could the end of Bob, as he was fondly called, come at an age when he was writing another book with the working title *Medical Mistakes and Miracles* and contributing so significantly to studies of the impact of the unprecedented ageing of populations upon society and its institutions?

Role model

He will be remembered as the epitome of aging with dignity, grace and good health, a role model for younger gerontologists like me and his fans growing by the years. He was a practitioner of all that he prescribed. His sharpness, alertness and vitality till he died is exemplary. It sets the tone befittingly for his promoted concepts of "productive ageing" and "successful aging". Dr. Butler, a pioneer in reflecting on old age as a function of disease, social-economic adversity and even personality was concerned with making lives of older people vibrant.

His research conducted in the 1960s established the fact that senility is not inevitable with ageing but, rather, a consequence of disease. As a physician and geriatrician he identified Alzheimer's disease as a national research priority for the U.S. and his interest in championing research and policy on older people with focus on their well being led him to be the founder of the first department of geriatric medicine at Mount Sinai and the National Institute on Ageing within the National Institutes of Health in his country. He later became associated with ILC-USA in New York City, a research, policy and education centre dedicated to the field of longevity and aging and which opened branches in some other countries too.

I know Bob never thought of retiring. As a longevity expert, he always recommended physical and mental activity, regularity with routines, inclusion of walking, exercising and reading. By choice he was an early riser, giving himself healthier time to be involved with work, which for him was never a burden. He loved research, writing, interacting with those interested in the field of aging. Connecting with friends, colleagues, of his age and those younger was important for him.

His energy, enthusiasm for work, ability to share was infectious. Since my first interaction with him few years ago at an international meeting where I delivered a talk using his work in the Indian context, we had regular communication on a variety of issues.

His insights and ability to draw attention to diverse dimensions of aging in societies is well recognised. He coined the phrase "ageism" to refer to age discrimination in American society but the term caters to a universal phenomenon, appealing in use to explain why older people are not chosen for employment, unrecognised for contribution in work, victims of elder abuse, ignored in policy and media responses. Bob wanted to stop perpetuation of age-related bias at different levels.

Can we afford?

I find it difficult to take the sad news of his demise and go through the pages of his earlier book *Longevity Revolution*, which I discussed extensively with him in 2008 while debating the benefits and challenges of living a long life while walking with him and attending professional events in St. Gallen, Switzerland. His optimism about life touched me. I am sure Dr. Butler as a great scholar and practitioner will always be remembered and will stay among us.

As he argued frequently, while extension of life, people living longer in all countries does raise questions of whether societies are able to afford ageing. But the present and future generations of enlightened citizenry will make transformations to age better.

They will refute myths and stereotypes on ageing and contribute towards celebration of life. For after all old age which was an experience of few in earlier times is now the experience of many and its perception has to be as 'a time of continuing vitality'.

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