

WESTEND REVIEW Spring 2003, Are you ageing faster than you realise?

Are you ageing faster than you realise? More is known about healthcare than ever before. However the quantity of information can be overwhelming and often, conflicting. Matters are confounded by things being good for us one day, bad the next. It seems we just can't get it right. All of this prompts varied response. For each individual who wades in to sift fact from fiction, another shrugs "Well, I have to die of something".

Unsurprisingly, everyone has their own perception of the best route to 'body beautiful'. But it wouldn't be untypical for this to comprise of solely an occasional visit to the GP (30 minutes wait - 5 minutes appointment), a handful of vitamins and homeopathic tablets (whatever your friend takes), an expanse of designer potions and cosmetics (to miraculously reverse what you have done to yourself) and a (stale) gym membership.

What most responses have in common is just that - they are responses, afterthoughts. Maybe you're treating a bad cold, a tired complexion, lack of energy... rather than implementing sustained good habits. Aside from being ineffective over the long-term, the methods can often be inappropriate. Take diets as a case in point: a dramatic decrease of food (usually wiping out everything rich in nutrients and good fats), causing a lowered metabolism, and finally more weight gain than before. Or a simple headache; paracetamols only conceal a symptom - they don't take away a cause. But rather than deal with these root causes, we tend to wait for the effects to bother us so much, that we are forced to do something.

A London clinic is hoping to change this routine. HB Health is a specialist anti-ageing clinic, modelled on its more established American counterparts. 'Anti-ageing' has immediate connotations of grey hair and wrinkles, but it really goes beyond the superficial. Although no one's claiming to overwrite genetics (yet!), there are significant benefits to be gained from lifestyle changes. The philosophy behind this new clinic is one of pro-active medicine as opposed to re-active. Through education, patient responsibility and well supported nutritional and lifestyle changes, they aim to prevent damage, and even reverse it.

In practical terms, this entails an intensive medical check up and analysis, followed through with relevant advice. This advice differs in that it is tailored to you, specifically. HB Health has a core of fully trained doctors who are specialised and fully participant in the latest advances in anti-ageing medicine. One of the strengths here is that the best elements from this field are sourced and applied in the care of each individual.

The process begins in consultation with your assigned Doctor. In my case this was Doctor Lynette Yong, the latest addition to their medical team. Young, friendly and a former surgeon, she gravitated to anti-ageing medicine after experiencing for herself, the benefits it offers.

She firstly seeks to establish a benchmark - your biological (as opposed to chronological) age. This is achieved through a most unique feature; a specifically designed computerised apparatus, which determines the performance of your body in relation to your age and sex. Among other things, it measures your visual reaction time, memory, highest audible pitch and lung capacity. This is best illustrated in the recent results of two 27-year-old women. The first, an executive with a stressful, rather unhealthy lifestyle came out with a biological age of 35; the other, a non-smoker, non-drinker with little stress in her life, 23 years old.

Once the results of this stage have left you flattered or depressed, samples of your blood and urine are whisked away for analysis. Amazingly it is checked for over 40 different indexes. This includes vitamins and minerals, hormones (testosterone, progesterone and so on), cortisol and DHEA (from the same family as adrenaline), blood proteins and much more.

These results are collated, the most rigorous medical examination you're ever likely to receive. Among other things, this covers lung capacity, skin damage, posture, breast health or testicular health, stamina, and muscle strength.

Finally all of this is put alongside an HONEST account of your typical weekly diet.

As a final stage, dependent on age or medical history, you might be advised to undergo a Coronary Calcium Scan, performed at Wellington Hospital's Cardiac Unit. An electronic beam is used to reconstruct an image of your heart, highlighting the distribution of calcium in the coronary vessels. These vessels can often fur up, leading to disease, in many cases without symptoms. Catching disease in its early stages means this part of the program has already saved lives.

Of course, findings are rarely so dramatic. More typically the process finds smaller things which can be tweaked. Where there are improvements to be made, these are fully explained to you. However it must be remembered that many major problems have small beginnings. We all know how easy it is to ignore the symptoms. Even something as simple as incorrect posture could lead to painful back problems in the future. Therefore the 'fear of the unknown' response is deemed entirely illogical, by value of the fact that it is obviously easier to solve a smaller problem, than a more advanced one.

Doctor Yong agrees that it's a pity this level of preventative care cannot be integrated into our overburdened NHS. So many ailments can be avoided with simple precaution. But it's not just the institutionalised NHS that needs a shake up. People's attitudes need to change too, in terms of responsibility for their



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own health. And if you think it's expensive, ask yourself how much money you spend servicing your car. Do you not deserve the same? Think of it as an investment.