

## Holding back the years with a little passion

By Sam Leith  
September 11, 2004

"We are giving birth," announces the trim, pretty blonde woman in the white trouser-suit, "to a new way of life".

Heather Bird, organiser and chief sponsor of Britain's first anti-ageing conference, is a woman who uses words like "search", "quest", "passion" and "mission" - as in: "It is my passion to get this information out."

Her personal journey has taken her from a Mormon childhood in Utah, via the World Health Organisation in Geneva, to a Beauchamp Place clinic and the modest title of "Europe's leading health and anti-ageing entrepreneur".

She believes that the time for anti-ageing medicine has come, and this two-day conference - which opened yesterday in Kensington town hall amid the vague smell of expensive moisturiser - is its showcase.

She introduces Dr Ronald M Klatz - founding President of the American Academy of Anti-Ageing Medicine ("A4M"), Doctor of Medicine (Central America Health Sciences University, Belize), and inventor of a patented "Brain Cooling Device". He has the stage presence of a cashiered televangelist, and if I didn't know he was an accredited expert in anti-ageing medicine, I'd have guessed that his lustrous chestnut-brown hair was a dye job.

"Passion," he says, "drives us." He is on a mission to defeat the defeatists: the conventional gerontologists who take a palliative, or "disease-based" view, of ageing. Why nurse the symptoms of age when you can prevent them in the first place?

Dr Klatz brings up a slide showing three photographs. "Vote for your vision of ageing," he says. On the left is a plump woman salsa-dancing in a frumpy dress - the centrepiece, he says, of the American Association for Retired People's ("unsuccessful") \$100 million campaign to recruit baby-boomers.

In the middle is an ancient old doll being looked after by a nurse - the conventional gerontological vision. On the right is an orange-tanned hunk doing a cheesy Charles Atlas body-building pose, with a bikini-clad lady body-builder draped admiringly down his flank.

These are A4M's poster-people: 84 and 72 years old respectively. Hooray!

The keynote speaker, Dr Robert Goldman (curly grey hair and a faint look of Robin Williams) is A4M's chairman. Among the credentials cited to introduce him are the ability to perform 321 handstand push-ups and 13,500 consecutive sit-ups, and "a black belt in Chinese weapons". He counts Arnold Schwarzenegger as "a very personal and good friend of mine".

With even more jocularly than his predecessor, he takes up the tune. What do we want to look like when we're old? "Sophia Loren!" he cries as her image appears on the screen. "Hot! Almost 80! Hot!" Someone murmurs in the audience. "Oh. She's 70?" he says. "Seventy! Still hot!"

Other speakers over the two days of the conference are to address topics including Alzheimer's diagnosis; the Pineal Life-Clock; RNA-based therapies; aspects of obesity treatment and hormone replacement therapy, among other things. The event has the feel of maybe 40 per cent trade fair; 40 per cent publicity exercise; 20 per cent academic conference.

Much is made of the "science's" interest in respectable peer-reviewed research into such topics as stem cells, nanotechnology and gene therapy. But anti-ageing keeps its mind open to "alternative medicine and emerging therapies": the pills and potions beloved by a public always keen to be on the safe side. This is big business.

Wandering around the exhibitors' stalls outside the lecture hall, I'm offered the chance to have my urine sent to Paris; I'm offered "nutraceuticals" and "cosmoceuticals" and "isolagen"; skin creams and "heavy detoxification protocol. . . physician-proven to help support the body's natural detoxification"; glossy brochures on mesoestetic skin treatment; Ultra-Potent C 1000; Rejuvenal Dietary Supplements. . . I have no doubt that all of these are exactly as efficacious as they sound.

The actress Brigitte Nielsen, 41 - vying with Shirley Bassey to be the jewel in the crown of the evening's gala dinner - has no doubts either. She is happily gobbling her vitamin pills while her 26-year-old Italian fiance scuffs his feet, muttering: "Basta, Brigitte. Basta (Enough)."

"I'm here because I love health and it's important to eat well and stay healthy," she tells us. "I'm here for some tips."

She ruffles a photographer's hair. She makes a V-for-victory sign.

"Lots of love," she says. "Peace." She seems a bit mad.

Later, I corner Heather Bird. "This may be the only circumstance in which it's polite to ask a woman her age," I say. "How old are you?" "How old do you think I am?" she asks.

I guess: "36?" She looks a tiny bit crestfallen. "I'm 34," she says. Then she rallies: "Usually I tell everyone I'm 70."

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