CenterPieces: Newsletter of the Center for Applied Research on Aging and Health (CARAH)

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Message from Dr. Laura Gitlin, Director of CARAH

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Welcome to the first issue of CenterPieces, the newsletter of the Center for Applied Research on Aging and Health. Aging is a highly personal phenomenon. It obviously affects each of us on an individual, familia, and socio-political-economic level. Only a short 50 years ago, aging was viewed as a disease rather than a natural and important stage of human development. Although older people are at increased risk for heart disease, cancer, stroke, falls and cognitive impairments, more so than any other age group, new scientific breakthroughs show that frailty and physical and cognitive decline is a complex phenomenon and not an inevitable part of aging. In fact, the vast majority of people over the age of 65 experience excellent health into their 80's and beyond.

Scientific understandings combined with population changes continue to challenge our basic notions about growing old. With the human life span now projected at 120 years, the fastest population growth occurring among persons 85+ years old, and the number of people aged 100 having more than doubled since 1990 (Japan has over 1 million persons 90+ years!), the mechanisms of aging and the physiological, behavioral and psychological adaptations are now center stage questions. The changing age structure of the United States (12% > 65 years in USA; 16% > 65 years in PA) is unprecedented. It is a phenomenon shared worldwide with sweeping, dramatic implications for health policy, health service delivery and health professional training.

Despite major advancements in understanding the aging process and treating age related diseases, we still have a long scientific journey to realize and enable healthy aging, particularly for minority older adults for whom health disparities continue to persist. For example, a 2003 study estimates that one in three persons 65 years or older – representing more than 11 million people – are at risk of going untreated or receiving inappropriate treatments for diseases associated with aging including dementia, mobility disorders and other conditions that place older adults at increased risk of losing their independence. Thus, many critical questions of public health import are in need of answers.

Given city, state, national and world-wide population trends, a focus on the health and wellbeing of older people must take precedence in our research, education and social initiatives. This is a critical time for multiple disciplines to join forces to study and serve older adults whose health can be characterized by complexity, comorbidities and chronicity.

This newsletter is one way CARAH plans to advance an aging perspective at Thomas Jefferson University. We invite you to work with us as we move forward with research, education and clinical service innovations.