CHILE FACING THE CHALLENGE OF AGING

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Demographic studies on the Chilean population give us some good news. If we compare a child born in Chile in 2010 with an adult born in 1970, the child can expect to live 15 years longer than the adult born 40 years before. This fact is due to the dramatic improvement in public health and is reflected in the fact that life expectancy for Chileans is now slightly better than for those born in the U.S.

The structure of the population of Chile has also suffered a drastic change due to a large decline in the fertility of Chilean families and the prolonged life expectancy. This means that Chile is aging and this presents with as many challenges as opportunities.

This topic was analyzed in depth in the two international workshops organized jointly by the National Council of Innovation for Competitiveness and by the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Chile between January 14 and 17. These events gathered Chilean experts with invited researchers from North America, Europe, Australia, Brazil, and Argentina who discussed the experiences they had gathered in different regions about the social, economic, urbanistic and health aspects that are strongly affected by this demographic change.

As a conclusion of these deliberations in these workshops one can mention that only a comprehensive plan of an interdisciplinary nature that covers these aspects as well as lifelong learning could avoid the very negative effects of this population shift. Undoubtedly such a plan would have to include a component of effective medical treatment to avoid the impact of an aging population.

Aging is the major risk factor for a wide range of chronic diseases that include cancer, diabetes, dementia, obesity and cardiovascular pathologies that all together contribute a major portion of the disease burden in Chile and in the majority of the advanced countries. For that reason, a country that is capable of maintaining its senior citizens in good health for a longer period could benefit greatly from the active participation of this age group in activities that favor society as a whole. In order to achieve this goal, Chile
needs to mount a campaign to convince its citizens of the great benefits of a healthy lifestyle in which they keep themselves mentally and physically active and also eat a healthy diet.

If these changes are not achieved, the increment in the numbers of senior citizens allow us to predict that by the year 2050 there will be in Chile 620,000 persons suffering Alzheimer disease and huge numbers with cancer, diabetes, cardiovascular disease and obesity. A big effect is necessary to avoid that these frightening predictions become true.

Also in these international workshops research results were presented which yielded optimistic hopes of advances in our knowledge about the biological process of aging which may open opportunities for therapeutic interventions that could cause a slowing of this process. If this could be attained, it could be possible to prolong the healthspan in humans, increasing by several years the productive lives of men and women. In this sense, it is noteworthy that Chile has very few groups dedicated to study the biology of aging and also there is a enormous deficit of medical specialists in geriatrics since presently only 3 specialists are completing this training per year in the whole country. It is clear that priority must be given to increase the human resources with capacity to work in these areas and also to conduct research and treatment of dementias that develop in the aged. The support of international centers in training specialists in these topics will be indispensable.

Nevertheless, a comprehensive plant that would allow Chile to face the great challenges of the new structure of its population in the next decades cannot be restricted to include only aspects of health and biological research. That plan must also include the design of housing and urban development programs that would permit senior citizens to live under conditions that limit falls and other accidents, that facilitate their mobility and allows them to enjoy and active social life.

Population aging can result in social exclusion of the elders and to lives of lonely. To combat these threats, society must generate mechanisms and activities that favor intergenerational integration and that promote solidarity.

Also this plan must design schemes of health insurance that will allow access to high quality treatments and prevention at reasonable costs. At the same time in the economic sphere, it is obvious that the pension system needs to be adapted to the new reality of the longer life expectancy. At the same time this implies a modification of the labor market to stimulate employment of older persons, as well as the structuring of systems to retrain these persons in the new technologies that are rapidly revolutionizing all human
endeavours. Continued education must be open to people of all ages since one is never too old to learn something new.

These considerations mean that, to face the challenge of the aging of its population, all of the Chilean society and very specially its political and intellectual leaders must be committed in the design and implementation of a comprehensive plan that can cope with the multiple impacts and also make the most of the opportunities that will result from this demographic change.

Chile is now one of the two countries of Latin America with the highest levels of population aging. If it takes the decision to act now, this country will emerge as a leader in this region in facing one of the most relevant issues of the XXI century.

All Chileans now have aging parents or grandparents and they themselves will have to face aging directly. All of us deserve to age with dignity and to enjoy good health that can allow us to enjoy the best of our lives. Healthy senior citizens should become a key component of our culture. This is why Chile must now make a big effort to achieve an ever increasing number of elders with healthy, happy, productive lives.