Medical: Predicting number of very old is confounding

Submitted by SHNS on Wed, 03/14/2012 - 15:20

By LEE BOWMAN, Scripps Howard News Service

Researchers trying to predict future numbers of the very old have missed the mark lately.

Plotting trends with the oldest old has always been a tough assignment as Americans overall moved toward increasingly longer lives in the 20th century. But the numbers are important for everything from retirement fund planning to public programs like Medicare and Social Security.

Some researchers want to bump the very old age bracket's startup to 90 from 85 in light of increased longevity. A report from the Census Bureau published in November by the National Institute on Aging used the new threshold, noting in 2010 there were 1.9 million 90-plussers -- triple the 1980 number -- and that by mid-century there could be as many as 9 million.

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The NIA report noted a number of reasons for estimates of the very old to run high: Some elderly don’t know how old they are or have no records to find out, some people round their age to the nearest five or zero, and some deliberately fib to "share in the esteem generally accorded extreme old age."

After all, for people of a certain age, a little exaggeration might be forgiven. It just needs to be adjusted for in statistics.

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