Geriatric Medicine in Historical Perspective: A View from the Medieval Arab World

ELISHA RUSS-FISHBANE
SKIRBALL DEPARTMENT OF HEBREW & JUDAIC STUDIES
As for me, my sun is in descent, extremely close to setting. My soul has been in a depression since the day my contemporary passed away, may his repose be in Eden. My [only] request from God is to allow me to live out this year, so that it not be said that both of them died in a single year. As my dear friend, you must know that “I move about as a shadow” (Ps. 39:7). I have no authority left, only the title. My vigor is exhausted, my strength weakened, as is my knee. My gait has become unsteady and my eyes have grown dim. When I have recourse to writing in my studies, the lines are sometimes straight and at other times contorted. It is the same with the words [themselves], as my mind has been unsettled since the day my dear son departed for Šoba [Aleppo] in order to bring home goods that are being held for him there. I pray that God bring him back in peace “before I depart and am no more” (Ps. 39:14).

[Some] say that a long life allows a person to achieve all that they desire both spiritually and materially… When a person reaches old age, all that he once desired fades away and he continues to live against his will, as [scripture] says, “until the arrival of the evil days, when the years come in which you say, ‘I have no interest in them’” (Eccl. 12:1). One’s radiance, appearance, beauty, senses, and strength fade away. One becomes like clouds emptied of their rain and left as dry vapor with no use, as [scripture] says, “before the sun, the light, the moon, and the stars go dark, and the clouds return after the rain” (Eccl. 12:2).

– Saadia Gaon (10th c.), Book of Beliefs and Opinions
I am no longer today like I was during the days of my youth. To the contrary, my strength has faltered, my heart is weary, my spirit is diminished, my tongue is heavy, and my hand trembles – I am too sluggish to compose even one small letter.

At times I [need to] lean against the wall and at times I write while lying down due to the great weakness of [my] body, for I am very physically weakened on account of old age.

– Moses Maimonides (12th c.), letters to Lunel
It is impossible then to prevent the marasmus of old age, but it is possible to help extend the length of life. And this is exactly what the so-called gerontological part of medicine is, its goal being to clarify the nature of the problem of aging, and to resist aging and prevent it as much as possible, so that the heart will never get dried out so much as to cease functioning.

Preventing or averting old age is impossible, but preventing the speed of its [development] is certainly possible and is the purpose of the regimen for the elderly in their diet, frequent bathing, sleeping, a comfortable bed, and avoidance of anything with drying or cooling properties.

– Maimonides, *Al-Fuṣūl fi’l-Tibb*, 17.36
It is necessary … for someone who is a lover of truth and at the same time diligent among the best not to flag in the face of the length of the art of hygiene, but to marvel at the magnitude of its precepts. For how are the actions of this art not great and wondrous – actions that allow a person to grow to a great age, maintaining himself continuously healthy, unaffected in the senses, free of disease, free of pain and sound in all parts, unless he happened to be altogether diseased in the body from the beginning?

– Galen, *Hygiene*, 310K-311K
The art of health preservation … does not bring to each body the extreme longevity that people desire… What the art of health preservation does is to bring the human body to that point known as the natural predetermined lifespan by preserving favorable [physical] conditions.

– Avicenna, *Kitāb al-qānūn fī al-ṭibb*, 1.3.1
As for anyone who conducts himself with the directives we have prescribed, I guarantee that he will not succumb to illness all his days, until he lives to an advanced age and dies without the need of a physician, such that his body will be sound and remain healthy throughout his life, unless he was sickly from birth or became accustomed to an unhealthy lifestyle from infancy…

– Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Character Traits 4.20