

The View from Here: Attitudes about aging are no joke

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By Greg Kesich

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After a particularly draining visit to the nursing home, my sister turned to me and said:

“That’s it. When I turn 75, I’m buying a pack of cigarettes.”

She is not a smoker. It was a joke, and I laughed.

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We could see that our 90-year-old father was fading. He was in physical pain and psychological distress and whatever help we were offering him wasn’t enough.

My sister was saying out loud what we both were thinking: That a life shortened by smoking seemed better than the one he was living. That we imagined ourselves in his shoes and it terrified us.

You hear versions of that joke all the time when the subject of aging comes up. People say things like, “If I get like that, just take me out behind the barn and shoot me.”

Since we are talking about ourselves, these jokes seem OK, even if they are a little grim. But words have meanings, and what we say informs what we do.

Last week, the editorial board heard an important presentation by the Maine Council on Aging about the language we use when we talk about people as they get older. The session was sparked by changes in the Associated Press Style Manual, the go-to reference work for newspapers like ours on matters of usage.

The AP now recommends that we no longer use terms like “the elderly” or “senior citizens” when describing older adults because the terms come with a lot of baggage that prevents us from seeing people behind the stereotypes. We are advised to avoid generalities and to be as specific as possible, to use words that describe instead of label.

Some are going to call this “political correctness, or “cancel culture,” but if you look, it’s easy to see how the words we use can affect our views.

One of the disturbing aspects of the politics of the COVID crisis is the way some people discount the more than 400,000 deaths by pointing out that many of the dead are people in their 70s, 80s and 90s.

These arguments are made by people who oppose policies they think will slow the economy or inconvenience them in some way, and some of the same people who make them were fighting against Obamacare a few years ago, claiming that it would create “death panels” and “kill Grandma.”

But behind the words is an assumption that we can't write off. Like the grim jokes, it expresses a judgment over which lives are worth living.

Like other kinds of prejudice, ageism doesn't have to be something we are aware of to work on us. It gets perpetuated by the choices we make even if we think it's not a factor.

The great irony is that while more people than ever are living into healthy old age, we are a culture that's obsessed with youth. It hasn't always been this way. If you look at high school graduation portraits from the 1940s and '50s, the kids look like grown men and women. Today, though, a billionaire CEO of a tech company will go to extraordinary lengths to dress like he's in middle school.

Internal beliefs about aging, including fears about our own future, find their way into policies and practices that make life harder for older adults.

More people are able to work past what used to be considered retirement age, but they still have to fight against old ideas about what makes a good employee when they look for a job. Older patients don't bother to seek help for treatable conditions because they have been told that these are just normal symptoms of aging. Older people are seen as a drag on society, and not contributors, and no one wants to think of themselves that way.

Which doesn't make a lot of sense in a place like Maine, where nearly half the population is old enough for membership in AARP.

We have a workforce shortage that slows economic growth. It's driven by demographic trends. There are fewer Mainers graduating from high school every year than there are people who celebrate their 65th birthday.

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The solution should include attracting younger people to live and work here through some combination of immigration from other countries and in-migration from other states. But it also should include a mental shift that makes us recognize that turning 65 is not the end of productive work life for everyone.

We can't make that shift without confronting our own fears about aging and recognizing how those fears color the way we see others.

The way we talk about aging matters. It's no joke.

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