

Coming of age: a study in longevity

MARY RUSSELL

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HOW DO you enjoy a long and happy life? Live well, is the answer, and as if to exemplify this, Prof Rose Anne Kenny breezes into our meeting, scarf and hair flying, wearing a blindingly yellow high-viz jacket, with a cycle helmet and laptop under her arm.

A clinician and neuroscientist, Kenny is passionate about the research she and her team at St James's Hospital in Dublin are doing in the area of ageing. For the first time, Ireland is heading for a population in which older rather than younger people predominate.

This change has huge implications for policymakers but especially for insurers, which is one reason Irish Permanent has been a major funder of Tilda, the longitudinal study on ageing in Ireland.

Figures come fast and furious as Kenny shows me graphs in which one line inclines sharply upwards (representing the increase in the number of people over 60 years) and is crossed by another that declines just as sharply (the decrease in the number of babies born).

In Europe, in the 1900s, where we had 22 people working for every retired person, now the ratio is only 2.5 to 1. Is Kenny worried about this huge demographic change?

Not at all. It means, she says, that we will now be armed with vital information that will enable policymakers to reach the appropriate decisions.

All of this she demonstrated when giving last week's Royal Irish Academy (RIA) discourse on ageing, an event which was attended by the young and old. And herein lies her message: a society in which it is good to grow old is good for everyone.

Her RIA discourse set out the work of Tilda, which is also financed by Atlantic Philanthropies and the Department of Health. Some 8,500 people from all over Ireland are participating in the study.

Ireland has come late to the field of longitudinal studies but that has now proved to be an advantage. "The first advantage," says Kenny, "is that we can use new technologies that weren't available before. This means we can make precise measurements of things like gait and speed of walking.

"We'll soon have everyone who needs it using phone apps, which alert them to heart rate or other changes in body performance and which will allow them modify their behaviour. Organisations like Intel, the IDA and Enterprise Ireland are creating a world-leading hub for these new programmes.

"The second advantage is that the longitudinal study is repeated every two years, which gives us a very comprehensive health-assessment section of research."

Some of the genes that govern ageing can, she says, be modified by diet and exercise. A switch on/off genetic button has already been used in experiments with mice, she says, so why not with humans?

RIA members were quick on their feet to comment on this at the event, asking if the education of participants had been factored in. It had.

Someone else spoke about former president Mary McAleese's interest in the plight of single men in rural Ireland leading solitary lives and likened this to Kenny's latest project.

The project is called Lamp, which stands for the Liberties Asset Mapping Programme. And assets is the operative word. Students in the Liberties in Dublin taking a year out of college will be trained to map their area, locating the proximity of pharmacies, parks, bus stops, cafes, libraries and fast-food outlets and relating this to the quality of living.

Lamp is similar to a project initiated by Michelle Obama in south Chicago, where researchers went out on the streets to map the neighbourhood. One mapping revealed there were 45 fast-food outlets to four grocery stores, and this was then related to a high incidence of diabetes.

Where older people were once regarded as a burden, Kenny wants to see age regarded as an asset in the community. She cites care-giving. While 3 per cent of care is provided by the State, she says, the rest is provided informally, similar to the way in which grandparents look after grandchildren, enabling parents to work and contribute to the growth of the economy.

Other aspects of the live-well regime up for discussion were sexual activity, wine and sleep, and here Kenny's enthusiasm bubbles over. We should have all three, she says, but maybe the wine in moderation.

As for sex, this is the perfect moment for the RIA president, Prof Luke O'Connor-Drury, to invite everyone to a glass of wine and to come to the February 16th discourse which, appropriately enough, is entitled *God and Sex – What the Bible Really Says*.

To learn more about Tilda, see cardi.ie

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