

Preparing for the Coming Quake: Baby Boomer Demographics and TCM

Don Lee, LAc, DNBAO, AOS, CSCS, QME

The future looks bright for practitioners of TCM. Despite the fact that TCM is thousands of years old, our profession is uniquely positioned to take advantage of new opportunities that lie yet ahead. Given our current understanding of health and wellness, the foresight and wisdom of early TCM practitioners in recognizing the value and effectiveness of nutrition, herbs, meditation, breath work, movement therapies (*qigong, tai chi*), manual therapies (tuina, acupressure) and acupuncture is impressive. Our profession has a solid foundation to tackle the health challenges of today, and it is poised to build on that foundation and thrive as the demographic ground shifts beneath us.

Rumblings on the Horizon

Approximately 78 million babies were born in the United States during the post WWII "boom years" of 1946 to 1964. As a cohort, the aptly-named "Baby Boomers" have demonstrated an unprecedented ability to influence—and establish—cultural trends and lifestyle choices. They are the key drivers of the labor and housing markets. They are an economic juggernaut, spending an estimated \$2.3 trillion each year on consumer goods and services. They also are redefining notions of aging—launching second careers, deferring retirement, and staying active. They are educated, demanding, and they are growing in numbers at an astonishing rate.

On a daily basis nearly 11,000 Boomers are turning 50. According to M. Thonhill's 2006 book, *"The Boomer Project,"* this is the equivalent to someone reaching the five decade mark every eight seconds! By 2020, according to U.S. Census projections, more than one-third (36 percent) of Americans will be age 50 and over, and almost one in five will be age 65+. Indeed in 2011, the first Boomers began turning 65. And thanks to both changes in lifestyle and advances in health care, people are living longer. In fact, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services projects that Baby Boomers who turn 65 now can expect to live, on average, another 18 years. That's why projections are that there will be more than 70 million people over the age of 65 by the year 2030—about 20 percent of the nation's population, compared with about 13 percent today.

Healthcare Needs of an Aging Population

The American Hospital Association's recent report: *"When I'm 64: How Boomers Will Change Health Care"* offers keen insights into the serious challenges that lie ahead for the U.S. healthcare system as the population ages. Yet these challenges, while profound, present opportunities for TCM practices to thrive.

Among key findings for 2030:

- The age 65+ population will nearly double as a result of the aging Boomer cohort.

- As Boomers age, greater than six in 10 will be managing one or more chronic health conditions.
- Nearly half - more than 26 million-will be grappling with arthritis.
- More than one of every three Boomers-21 million individuals-will battle obesity.
- One of every four, some 14 million people, will be living with diabetes.
- Eight times more knee replacements will be performed than today.

These findings suggest numerous opportunities for the TCM profession, as many of the healthcare challenges facing the Baby Boom generation play to the strengths of TCM.

With increased longevity comes increased prevalence of chronic disease, or more likely multiple chronic diseases. Currently, 8.6 million people have multiple chronic conditions, a number expected to explode to approximately 37 million in 2030.

The AHA report identifies diabetes, arthritis, obesity and falls as major health challenges facing the Boomer generation in their retirement years. All of these normally respond well to lifestyle changes and modalities espoused by TCM. Clinically, they respond positively to proper dietary changes, exercise and stress reduction techniques. While Western science has yet to definitively prove that acupuncture and herbs have clinical efficacy, there is sufficient anecdotal evidence to warrant continued practitioner and patient use of such modalities.

Future "Thrival" of Your Practice

Given the major challenges facing the Boomer generation, practitioners who have the training and experience to effectively treat and manage conditions associated with aging will be well positioned for decades to come. After more than a decade of practice and teaching (and being a Boomer myself), I have heard the healthcare challenges of aging rumbling on the near-term horizon. On both personal and professional levels, I have prepared myself and have reaped the rewards of that preparation- a satisfying and continually growing practice, and better health.

What can you do to get ready for and to thrive in the coming Boomer quake? Start—today—to develop a deeper knowledge of geriatrics and expand your expertise in healthy aging. Your practice's future "thrival" may well depend on your ability to help an expanding older adult population live and age well.

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