*In this number***Global theme issue—Ageing**

In October 1997 many journals around the world will be focusing by agreement on Ageing as an issue for health research and publication (the week of 22 October for weekly journals). We are pleased to join in this global focus on probably the major source of need for care, management, and research in the next century.

We have had many papers submitted and because of the long time scales involved in publishing a bi-monthly journal, we will have several held over until our next number in December 1997. However, in this number we have papers from several countries covering epidemiology, health services research, and methods in relation to ageing, and a specially commissioned comment.

JECH and Society for Social Medicine combined meeting

We also publish the abstracts from the UK Society for Social Medicine meeting in September 1997, and I would like to draw readers' attention to the combined meeting to be held in Manchester on 30 October 1997, sponsored by the Journal and the Society for Social Medicine, "Epidemiology - Past and Future: A Celebration of 50 Years of the JECH". Speakers with international reputations will address the future of epidemiology with a look back at the past 50 years of the Journal.

STUART DONNAN
Editor

*Comment***Public health implications of ageing**

Shah Ebrahim

We can all expect to live longer than our parents in most countries of the world as increasing life expectancy has become a global phenomenon.¹ What surprises is the relative speed of recent gains: life expectancy in Britain increased by 2.5 years between 1971 and 1991, which is equal to the gains achieved between 1851 and 1961.² However, improvements in life expectancy in central and eastern Europe have been lost since the break up of the former USSR.³ Declines in fertility have contributed most to population ageing over the past century, but falls in mortality even at older ages have also had important effects. In developing countries, there is no doubt that maternal and child health services have had a major impact in accelerating population ageing through the promotion of effective family planning. Unfortunately, population ageing is too frequently seen as a "problem" rather than as a legacy of successful social and economic development.

Causes of increased life expectancy

The question "Why are the Japanese living longer?"⁴ is not short of plausible answers: reductions in environmental and personal risk factors for common diseases, economic and social development, better health and social policy, investment in social capital,⁵ and

interactions between these explanations are all possibilities. Untangling such complex variables, many of which are intrinsically hard to measure given the paucity of relevant data, is the tricky bit. Income disparities are clearly relevant, but are only partial predictors of life expectancy.⁶ The role of medical care in extending life expectancy remains an area of considerable controversy.⁷

The different experiences of the countries of the former USSR and western European countries provide new opportunities to conduct better ecological trend analyses, in addition to cohort studies linking individual risk factors to subsequent survival in different populations. Topics that require study include quantity and quality of medical care, environmental pollution, socioeconomic factors, and health behaviours.³

Compression of morbidity

While demographic projections have tended to provoke gloomy views of increased social and health care burdens, the concept of compression of morbidity—future cohorts will postpone morbidity and disability into a smaller portion of their lives—has been helpful in providing a more "up-beat" view of the future.⁸ Alternative hypotheses are of expansion of

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