How to measure the burden of mortality?

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OBJECTIVES: To explore various methods to quantify the burden of mortality, with a special interest for the more recent method at the core of calculations of disability adjusted life years (DALY).

DESIGN: Various methods calculating the age schedule at death are applied to two historical life table populations. One method calculates the “years of life lost”, by multiplying the numbers of deaths at age x by the residual life expectancy. This residual life expectancy may be discounted and age weighted. The other method calculates the “potential years of life lost” by multiplying the numbers of deaths at age x by the years missing to reach a defined threshold (65 years or 75 years).

METHODS: The period life tables describing the mortality of Dutch male populations from 1900–10 (high mortality) and from 1990–1994 (low mortality).

RESULTS: A standard life table with idealised long life expectancy increases the burden of death more if mortality is lower. People at old age, more prevalent if mortality is low, lose more life years in an idealised life table. The discounted life table decreases the burden of death strongly if mortality is high: the life lost by a person dying at a young age is discounted. Age weighting the discounted life table balances the effect of discounting.

CONCLUSIONS: For the purpose of description of the burden of mortality, the aggregate life table of the studied populations gives the better description of the age schedule at death. Discounting and the use of idealised lifetables as a standard increase the burden of mortality of degenerative disease at the end of life. The age weighted discounted life table violates the principle of parsimony.

One of the yardsticks used to evaluate health across populations, time or other characteristics is death rates. Mortality is easy to measure because of the unambiguous end point. But we all will die, but preferably at a later age. The burden of mortality is therefore defined by the age at death: how bad is it to die at a younger age instead of at an older age.

The classic epidemiological method to compare the mortality across populations with different age structures is to standardise mortality by age. Age specific rates are weighted by the age distribution of a standard population. The demographers way to adjust for age is to calculate a life expectancy. The (period) life expectancy is the mean age at death in a stationary population with fixed birth and age specific mortality rates of a given period, and is independent of the age distribution. The life table transforms occurrence (the age specific mortality rates) in time (the expected duration of life). The life expectancy summarises the age specific death rates of a certain period, and informs us about the average number of years a cohort may live if these rates remained constant.

Older public health measures of lost life were based on “potential years of life lost”. This measure values all deaths before a certain age with the number of years lost before a desirable age that everybody should reach (usually 65 years, but older thresholds are of course possible). A neonatal death loses 65 years, a death at age 1 64, and so on. Deaths at older ages are ignored. In occidental populations with low mortality, the majority of all deaths are therefore not counted as a burden.

Recently, the Global Burden of Disease Project introduced a new measure to summarise the age schedule of mortality in the DALY (disability adjusted life years). In the description of this method, I only consider loss of life through death, not loss of quality of life through disease. The DALY adds four value judgements to the age at death. Two judgements consider the desired age at death: the project chooses as a standard a life table of an idealised population with very high life expectancy, which is different for men (80 years) and women (82 years). Then a discount rate of 3% per year for any “future” loss of life is added. Then an age weighting formula is added. A death at a certain age is multiplied by its residual life expectancy in this ideal gender specific life table, discounted by 3% per year of the life years foregone and weighted by the “value” of these life years at every future age a life year is lost.

In this paper, I explore empirically the different methods of summarising and valuing the age schedule of human mortality by comparing the burden of mortality of two historical populations: the Dutch male population in 1900–1910, with the high mortality comparable to present day Africa, and the Dutch male population in 1990–1994, with the low mortality common to all modern rich market economies.

METHODS

To assess the different methods of estimating the burden of mortality, I took the life tables of Dutch men of 1900–10 (henceforth called 1900) and 1990–94 (henceforth called 1990) and used these as examples of stationary populations with high (1900) and low (1990) mortality. These life tables are in table 1. The male life expectancy in 1900 was 50.5 years, in 1990 74.1 years. The last column shows the age adjusted mortality ratios of these two periods.

The burden of mortality is defined by

$$BM = \sum_{x=0}^{x=\text{max}} d_x w_x$$

Where BM is the burden of mortality, $d_x$ are the numbers of death at age x and $w_x$ is the weight. In a population $d_x$ is the

Abbreviations: DALY, disability adjusted life years; PYLL, potential years of life lost
absolute numbers of deaths at age $x$. In this life table exercise, 
"d,$x$" are the numbers of death in the age-interval $x$ to $x+I$ of 
the synthetic life table cohort.

In calculations of lost life years, the residual life expectancy 
($e,$x) at the age of death is used as weight:

$$w_x = \frac{1}{L_x} \sum_{a=x}^{\infty} L_a$$

$L_x$ is the size of the surviving cohort at age $x$ and $\Sigma L_a$ is 
the number of person years yet to live at age $x$. This leaves the 
choice of the standard life table determining the life expectancy as weight. The Global Burden of Disease project chose an "ideal" standard, with a very old population (male life expectancy of 80 years). To explore the sensitivity of the chosen standard, I constructed two extreme standards, based on these historical life tables. I scaled the historical mortality ratios to a life expectancy of exact 50 years ("low standard") and exact 80 years ("ideal standard") (see table 2). The burden of mortality calculated by the standard life table with a life expectancy of 50 years, discounted at 3% per future year of life lost and age weighted according to the Global Burden of Disease project formula.

An older method of weighting the age at death are the potential years of life lost (PYLL). All deaths before a certain age (the youngest age threshold chosen is 65, the oldest 75) are weighted by the numbers of years lost before that age. Consequently, $w_x = (T-x)$, where $x$ is age at death and $T$ is the desirable age everybody should reach. If that desirable age is 65, a death at age 0 loses 65 life years, a death at age 50 loses 15 life years, a death at age 66 loses nothing.

RESULTS

The resulting weights are in figure 1 and table 2. A (male) 
death at birth loses 80 years of life by applying the undiscounted 
high standard life table (LL80). The same baby loses 30 years by applying the discounted life table (DLL80), and 31 years by the discounted age weighted table (ADLL80). He will lose 50 years by applying the low standard life table (LL50). Altogether 65 potential life years are lost (PYLL65). At age 70, a death will lose 15 years (LL80), 12 discounted years (DLL80), 7 discounted and age weighted years (ADLL80), 9 life years in the low standard life table (LL50), and no potential life years before age 65 (PYLL65). Note that in any life table without a limiting threshold (such as the PYLL) at all ages people will lose life years. Even in the life table with a very low life expectancy of 50 years, a death at 90 year old will lose more than two years of life.

The age weights are introduced to weight years lost at adult and productive life more than those lost at very young or very old ages. I will use the notation ADLL80 for the age weighted discounted life table (life years lost in the standard life table with a life expectancy of 80 years, discounted at 3% per future year of life lost and age weighted according to the Global Burden of Disease project formula).
newborn has a lot to lose: discounting cuts deep in his and table 2). A nonagenarian has little to lose in the future: mortality is high, but only by 28% when mortality is low (fig 1). The burden of mortality results are in table 3. Weighted for the pure life table standards of 80 years, 50 years and the age weighted discounted life table of 80 years (ADLL80) run in parallel. The absolute level of difference is high, but the relative difference by age is rather small. The discounted age weights, however, cut across all other life table schedules. Discounting devalues the value of life at younger ages more than at older ages, and decreases more sharply the burden of death if mortality is high and occurring at young ages.

The burden of mortality in 1900 and 1990
in years lost per person in the life table population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1990</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>1900/1990</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LL80</td>
<td>33.9</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LL80d</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LL50</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LL50</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PYLL65</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1 shows how the weighting schedules of age at death for the pure life table standards of 80 years, 50 years and the age weighted discounted life table of 80 years (ADLL80) run in parallel. The absolute level of difference is high, but the relative difference by age is rather small. The discounted age weights, however, cut across all other life table schedules. Discounting devalues the value of life at younger ages more than at older ages, and decreases more sharply the burden of death if mortality is high and occurring at young ages.

DISCUSSION
The absolute burden of mortality is unknown, as the ideal mortality schedule cannot be identified. The moral underpinning of any method assessing the burden of mortality is that it is better to live longer. The aim of any method is therefore relative: to compare populations and to assess the relative importance of causes of death. Any measure of the burden of mortality is determined by the remaining age specific mortality rates. The choice of standard leads to very different results because the mortality differences between high and low mortality populations are much higher in the younger age groups: taking the high mortality population as a standard will add more value to deaths occurring at younger ages and vice versa.

The life table transforms occurrences rates in residual life expectancies at any age. Each residual life expectancy is determined by the remaining age specific mortality rates of the surviving population. In the life table method of calculating the burden of death, numbers of deaths are multiplied by the residual life expectancy at age of death. As a standardised rate, the standard matters. A life table standard with a very low mortality (as in the DALY method) increases relatively the burden of mortality at older ages. In a comparative evaluation of the burden of mortality of various causes of death, the choice of a very low mortality standard will inflate the burden of age related disorders compared with the burden of mortality at younger ages. The use of a very low mortality standard in a high mortality population is therefore inconsistent with the moral principle that it is better to die at an older age.
Confusion about “health gaps”11 could be avoided by the reminder that life expectancies are but transformations of age dependent death rates. These dwelling times have no implicit biological meaning; they only reflect the variance of mortality by age in a population. The 14 life years “lost” in the male population with life expectancy of 74 years (1L780) have no meaning whatsoever, except that it is less than the 34 years lost if life expectancy is 50.5 (which makes the “ideal state of health”) a lot less ideal in the high mortality population. Murray et al argue that such a health gap is needed to compare the lost of life in different populations.12 That is identical to the statement that the crude mortality rate of Rwanda cannot be compared with that of Japan. That is why a standard is needed. Any life table standard will do: the lifetable of Rwanda, that of Japan, the aggregate life table of both populations or that of any other population. In fact, the fourth DALY assumption, different standards for men (80 years) and women (82 years), make these estimates incomparable.

The only dimensions in the burden of mortality are mortality and age. Strings of value judgements and assumptions, all pertaining to the one and only dimension of age, should be avoided. Rates and transformed dwelling times in a life table, but there transformations should stop. To make unbiased comparisons, the internal reference is the best standard: that is the aggregate life table of the studied populations.

REFERENCES