

Roundtable looks at longevity and the boomers

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NBC News special correspondent Tom Brokaw moderated the event.

It's been called "elderquake" and "the silver tsunami." Its statistics are staggering: Over the next three decades, the number of people older than 65 in the United States will double from 40 million to 80 million.

According to Stanford University President John Hennessy, "[Medicare](#) and Social Security will be equal to the entire tax revenue of the country" by mid-century. Unless something changes, we are facing a future, he said, with "no money left for defense, no money for education, no money for research."

Hennessy was one of six leaders from the worlds of business, law and academia engaged in a wide-ranging discussion during the fifth annual [Roundtable](#) at Stanford on Oct. 23. Tom Brokaw of NBC News

moderated "Generation Ageless: Longevity and the Boomers."

Panelists said the widely ignored aspects of an aging population will affect every aspect of our lives – social, political and economic.

For one participant, it already has. Sandra Day O'Connor recalled stepping down from the Supreme Court in 2006 to care for her husband, who had Alzheimer's disease (he died last year after 57 years of marriage). The couple moved closer to family in Arizona. Brokaw asked if she and her husband had discussed the possibility that one of them would be disabled in old age in the years before his diagnosis.

"Of course not!" she said emphatically. "You just assume you're fine. Things will go on." The disease altered her perspective, making her aware how much Alzheimer's is a huge threat to our collective future.

"I turned 80, I don't even like to say the word," she said. However, noting that one in every two people has Alzheimer's after turning 80, she said her chances of contracting the disease are significant.

"What are we going to do?" she asked. She recalled that we have attacked other diseases "on a broad scale" to find a remedy – Brokaw later mentioned the pink-ribbon campaigns against breast cancer, and the visibility of the Mothers Against Drunk Driving. O'Connor added, "We have not done that for Alzheimer's, and we must – we really must."

According to Laura Carstensen, founding director of the Stanford Center on Longevity, in less than a century, we have added 30 years to life expectancy, yet "we haven't established new norms about life and family."

Barry Rand, chief executive officer of AARP, which represents 40 million people who are 50 and older, reinforced Carstensen's suggestion

that we spread the chores of life around to extend productivity into old age and relieve the stress on the "sandwich generation" that cares for children and parents at the same time.

He said of the group represented by AARP, 41 percent still finance their children, 30 percent take care of parents.

Speaking of the elderly, he said, "What they don't want to do is extend those bonus years in doing nothing." He said they feel "there's a future, I'm still involved in that future, I want to help make that future." They are looking for "where they can add value."

They are also concerned about the future of their children and grandchildren.

They don't want this economy to suddenly leave their kids out, he said.

Several panelists suggested raising the retirement age from 65.

"I love to work – always did," said O'Connor. "Many people of my age feel that way. "

However, she noted the repercussions of raising the retirement age from 60 to 62 in France, where strikes and riots have wracked the nation.

"My goodness, the whole country blew up," she said.

Several panelists stressed the need for more workplace opportunities to defray the cost of a retired population. Rand called for an end to age discrimination in hiring. He said the last few years have seen "100 percent increase in age discrimination (actions), because people can't find jobs."

Sheryl Sandberg, chief operating officer at Facebook, also underscored the importance of keeping people in the workplace, particularly women.

"Corporations have changed a lot" in regard to sexual discrimination, she said. "What hasn't changed quite is the home."

Women still bear the burden of caring for elderly parents, and a daughter or daughter-in-law is likely to have that role "three times as much as husbands or brothers," Sandberg said.

With an [aging population](#), "how many more women does that drive out of the workforce?" she asked.

"In Silicon Valley, we're great at technology, but very insularly focused," Sandberg said. "The issues represented here are very real. We know the numbers don't add up."

Issues of longevity underscore inequities in society, and quality of caregiving is largely a function of income.

"If you're physically fit, mentally sharp, and financially secure, you do really well as an old person," Carstensen said. "We know already that people with high levels of education fare very well into very advanced ages."

Neuroscientist and Stanford professor Robert Sapolsky said issues of [longevity](#) increasingly have "everything to do with social status – very little to do with who came down with polio or bubonic plague."

More and more, he said, it boils down to "did you pick the right womb?" If, when you arrive at old age, you have a lifetime of being "peripheralized," the years will make "every metaphorical joint arthritic."

During a discussion about obesity in the young, which threatens to add to long-term costs to health care, Sapolsky said we are now facing questions that go beyond the questions raised in traditional research, because of the "totally bizarre disease we deal with – a world of kids getting diabetes."

"When people are feeling unhappy, why do they eat starch?" he asked.

Sandberg, speaking for the "tweeners" struck a hopeful note in the general atmosphere of alarm.

"We think technology can redefine what it means to age," she said.

She noted that half the boomers have a social networking profile, and that "Facebook can help people watch their grandkids grow up" when great distances divide them.

Carstensen, too, put a characteristically positive spin on the dire statistics.

"We're at a historical point where three, four and five generations may be alive at the same time," she said. "A hundred years ago, 20 percent of kids were orphaned before they were 18."

Often that's framed as a problem, but she asked the audience to imagine a family where grandparents, great-grandparents, and perhaps even great-great grandparents are "all invested in the well-being of the youngest among us."

"It's a fantastic achievement," she said.

Provided by Stanford University

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