Dealing with Uncertainty in the Field of Anti-Aging Medicine

Larissa Pfaller (University of Erlangen-Nürnberg) & Mark Schweda (University of Göttingen)

Background

The development of anti-aging medicine stands for an increasing hype of individual prevention and autonomous biomedical life plans for aging, but also creates new ethical problems of decision making under uncertainty that need to be explored and analyzed.

Its orientation towards the future opens a space of indeterminableness that can be a gateway for illusionary promises and improper medical treatments undermining the promise of increased autonomy.

Therefore, the perspectives of providers and users and their ways of decision making and dealing with uncertainty are highly relevant for the ethical assessment of anti-aging interventions.

Aims of Anti-aging

- Symptom alleviation
  - Cosmetic (anti-wrinkle cream)
  - Prophylactic (exercise and diet or vitamin pills)
- Life expectancy extension
  - Compensatory (Viagra)
- Lifespan extension
  - Fighting diseases related to old age and increasing the years that can be spent without disease
- Abolition
  - Open the possibility of greatly extended human longevity
  - Change the fundamentals of biological aging for extended aging and for the creation of immortality

Methodological Approach

Data Collection (state 2011)

- Practitioners: Expert interviews (7), Websites, Congresses
- Users: Narrative interviews (15), Focus groups (10)

Analysis

- We analyze the data material in order to reconstruct the practitioners’ (discourse-analysis) and users’ (sequence analytic methods) perceptions of the future and future health in the context of anti-aging medicine.

Results

Practitioners

- "Anti-aging is a question of lifestyle"
- Strategies of promoting anti-aging
- Expertocracy: Authority of science and expertise
- Responsibilization: Appeal to individual responsibility

Users

- "Anti-aging is a field of uncertainty"
- Strategies of dealing with uncertainties
- Medical optimism: Trust in science and expertise
- Preventive maximalism: In case of doubt - play it safe

Conclusions

- Anti-aging practices directly negotiated between practitioners and individual users - intermediary, regulatory or controlling instances (e.g. professional associations, health insurance, or state) are eliminated.
- Practitioner-perspective: Anti-aging directed at commercial profit and promoted by strategies such as reference to scientific expertise and appeals to individual responsibility.
- User-perspective: Anti-aging surmounted by uncertainties provoking coping strategies such as trust in scientific progress or rational choice-approaches to decisions under uncertainty.
- Making life plans and healthcare decisions based on lacking regulation, ambiguous information and strong emotional involvement can lead to unwarranted "medical optimism" and "preventive maximalism" which undermine autonomy and put users at risk of commercial exploitation, psychological disappointment and unsafe medical procedures.

References


http://www.biomedizinische-lebensplanung.uni-goettingen.de