

SPANISH POSITION ON THE FUTURAGE CONSULTATION

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1. INTRODUCTION

Concern about and interest in studies on the ageing of the Spanish population have been strengthening with the growing number of people over 65 years old (over 7.5 million in 2008, according to *Informe 2008. Las personas mayores en España*), given that Spain already finds itself among the six countries with the oldest population (*UN. World Population Prospects 2008*).

In response, research done in Spain by Spanish scientists on ageing has been growing over the past 25 years to reach 1% of Spain's total scientific production, constituting a significant portion of medical-biological and social studies, within which the psychological approach has emerged strongly in recent years. The first type of studies reflects the traditional medical view of ageing and the latter depicts scientists' perspective about ageing as a multi-factorial human and social phenomenon to be analysed in relation to the social

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welfare state in Spain since the 80s (*Informe 2008. Las personas mayores en España*).

As it has increased in prominence, research on ageing has gained a place in the government's R&D&I agenda. In recent years the Ministry of Science and Innovation has funded nearly 100 research projects on ageing, most of them in biology and medicine (60%), with psychology in second position (22%) and social sciences in third position (10%). While these projects are in related fields, it is not always clear that they succeed in joining forces to become interdisciplinary. The Instituto de Salud Carlos III (Carlos III Health Institute) and the Instituto de Mayores y Servicios Sociales (Institute for the Elderly and Social Services) also fund research in the fields of health and social studies.

Future prospects for research on ageing in Spain include several opportunities outlined in the National Strategy for R&D&I. These research areas stand out: (i) biomedical (clinical diagnosis, genetic markers, diseases related to human ageing), (ii) social (demographic changes, the social welfare state), (iii) psychological (neurocognitive and psychosocial aspects) and (iv) technology (development of technological applications in the field of the older person and the household).

2. THE CONSULTATION IN SPAIN

In the Spanish context, this FUTURAGE consultation represents an essential opportunity to set down the scientific priorities of Spanish researchers on ageing. Details of the consultation were made available on Dec. 15th 2009 to the 500 researchers, professional associations and other entities included in the directory of Spanish researchers in geriatrics and gerontology (Portal Mayores, <http://www.imsersomayores.csic.es/seniinv/quienesquien/index.html>). Over 50 responses were received (some 10% of the people and entities contacted), of which we used 46 here, after discarding some with serious inconsistencies in the proper interpretation of some of the consultation's sections and lacking data on the informants' identities.

3. RESULTS

In general, we can say that the answers may be biased depending on respondents' academic training and professional development with significant differentiation between biogerontological aspects in one hand, and human and social rights on the other. In this case, the priority distribution tends to follow a certain interdisciplinary background, and a higher concentration is found in social sciences than in biogerontology, to the extent that three of the four research areas targeted in the query can be 'recognized' as being closer. About 80% of respondents selected 'healthy ageing' as a priority, while only 47% opted for biogerontology, standing out contributions from neurologists, geriatricians, nutritionists, physiologists and health professionals. In the social sciences, psychologists predominate (one fourth in total), followed by economists, geographers, political and education scientists and social workers in second place. Finally, some respondents are members of public administration, NGOs and companies.

The answers provided by scientists about **biogerontology research** over the next few years follow a double line of interest in connection with two social phenomena specific to the ageing process, the *morbidity* associated with older peoples' diseases and the resulting *disabilities* that condition their daily lives. On one hand, respondents highlighted research on physical diseases (metabolic, vascular and neurophysiological), linked to diagnosis through biological markers and genetic modifications, essential in the biological ageing process, and expressed interest in neurodegenerative processes in Alzheimer's disease and senile dementia. Some respondents mentioned diseases due to unhealthy habits. All are processes of tremendous biological significance in the challenge of understanding the degenerative process and disability malfunctions, and their impact on the daily lives of affected people and families.

The lines defined for the **resources sector** follow a clear argument: many Spanish researchers are interested in linking the implementation of resources for older people to determining their needs in relation to the evaluation of their health and foreseeable demands due to disability and dependency situations. *Family* and *family caregivers* are an area of vital interest to Spanish society, with two related points of concern: the workload of family members caring for

their elders and the model of care that the State makes available to families as a supplement/replacement, and aspects associated to it. Future research on the resources provided to the elderly has a *dual social and economic component*. In the first case, the family and social network stand out as a basic tool that Spanish society uses for personal care and social development of older people and their immediate environment. In the second case, respondents mention the design of a suitable economic model for the older, essentially the sustainability of the pension system and other economic benefits, and the availability of a more extensive system of senior residences and assisted living facilities with better coverage than exists at present. Although it is not explicitly stated, the social and economic resources would be connected to a deepening of the Spanish social welfare state.

The **environments of ageing** have been interpreted in the questionnaire as an interaction between the personal sphere and other vital dimensions in the search for conditions for *active ageing* and *quality of life* in older age. On the personal level, future research should address issues related to changing health conditions by developing healthy activities to alleviate the dependency process. Future research should also seek to improve older people's status of in society by avoiding discriminatory images (ageism) or violent situations, and enhancing social relations in the living environment. Concerning the residential aspects, respondents recommended the study of the home environment itself (ageing at home) as an instrument of quality of life through improving material conditions in homes and buildings and the urban environment (healthy cities). On the other hand, respondents also stressed their interest in the improvement of residential areas specifically for the institutionalized elderly. Spanish researchers have a growing interest in developing in technology initiatives in the personal (technical aids) and domestic areas (domotics) for improved quality of life. Finally, it is interesting to note the emphasis on improving social policies regarding the elderly as part of a social welfare state that combines personal and domestic (private) with public resources.

Future research on **healthy ageing** is concentrated in some of the issues already considered. Quality of life is mentioned as an important issue in future

research related to active and healthy, "successful" ageing. The dimensions highlighted in this process are: (i) improvement in older people's cognitive functioning by strengthening active behaviours that empower them to engage in for healthy activities central to their lives, (ii) strengthening prevention of risks of disease or loss of autonomy, including those induced by the appearance and use of new technical tools in their daily lives, (iii) the development of healthy habits, not only in nutrition, but also in the practice of physical activities or sports, and (iv) strengthening their social life by increasing (or at least maintaining) their systems of social and intergenerational relations that facilitate greater and more active participation in their living environment.

What are the **priorities** that require a more vigorous European collaboration? What **infrastructures** would be needed for its development in a European context? These two major issues must be addressed, in the Spanish case, with an acknowledgement of their obvious interdependence, the more so since informants themselves have not always been able (or willing) to differentiate them clearly. Thus, it is possible to distinguish three major aspects to consider: funding, European collaboration and the definition of entities to structure European research.

Undoubtedly, adequate funding is a very important priority/need for many informants, and in both major types of scientific interests: (i) research on physical diseases (biomedicine) and mental diseases, especially senile dementia and Alzheimer's disease and care procedures and the quality of that care, and (ii) other social aspects of research, such as the mobility/migration of older persons, social policies oriented to these people (community and institutional programs) and available resources (residential, social, economic, equipment and adaptation technologies, programmes of information about resources). The strategy suggested by some informants to strengthen this research is multidisciplinary and longitudinal studies of cohorts, with specific attention to certain issues.

To develop these priorities, those who participated in the questionnaire made it clear that to achieve our goals we need 'European collaboration', as an essential prerequisite in the future, with a global approach and that emphasizes

the differences between countries, a multi-centric collaboration between basic and applied researchers that uses consensus as a basis for scientific agreements under the umbrella of common supranational norms for action. Beyond these general principles, the Spanish consultation proposes two types of entities to structure future research on ageing. At the physical level, informants mention the structures that support research (databases, bio-banks, diagnostic equipment). In the area of relations, most informants mention knowledge structures such as networks that would be robust and based on new or existing resources, or institutes (for example, to promote autonomy and on dependence and ageing). To fill some present gaps, we also need to share theoretical backgrounds and methodological approaches among researchers and professionals as well as to increase the critical mass of research -all of which would reinforce the efficiency and efficacy of European research.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The exploration of the Spanish system on science shows the multiplicity of initiatives and strategies that researchers and research groups have developed for studies of ageing. Spanish scientists have many opportunities to carry out their research with funding from the central administration and regional governments. However, research on ageing is still dominated by 'disciplinary' research with a clear separation between the 'biological' sciences and the social sciences and psychology. For this reason it is not easy to establish interdisciplinary research structures, although scientific practices in some research communities may allow such shared structures to emerge. In this area we have a long way to go.

Secondly, future prospects for research on ageing in Spain identified in this consultation are mostly already underway. The information available in the National Strategy for Science and Technology and recently developed research projects seem to confirm this. Similarly, the ageing process of the Spanish population in recent decades and its future prospects ensure the demand for biological and social research as Spanish society calls for a broader and deeper

understanding of this reality, which the public administration also needs in order to better plan and develop public policies.