

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Facing up to the inevitable

Every day, Montgomery County government updates the number of people who have died from Covid-19. Thus far, about 80 percent have been aged 70 or older. Nursing homes have been particularly hard hit.

Life is precious at any age, but Covid-19 would be much more tragic if, like the Spanish flu of 1918, the highest percentage of fatalities occurred among young people and those in the prime of life.



Commentary by
Thomas Hylton

For most working age people, the pandemic's greatest effect is the economic collapse, which may take years to repair. Some worry the "cure" for the pandemic — shutting down schools and businesses — may be worse than the disease.

Last week, I published excerpts of an essay by Penn ethicist Ezekiel Emanuel, M.D., about the inevitability of bodily deterioration and death. Emanuel talks about the popular fantasy of "American immortals" — people who live long, vigorous lives, and then abruptly die without any aches or pains.

We all know someone like this. My friend Jimmy Fichtol opened a tailor shop on High Street in 1919 and worked happily there for seven decades. As far as I know, he was never sick a day in his life and died peacefully in his sleep at 98.

But Emanuel suggests that very, very few people are this fortunate. While people are living longer, they also are living with more painful diseases and disabilities, eroding their quality of life.

That's why Emanuel claims he will not seek treatment for cancer, heart disease or any other life-threatening illness once he reaches 75.

As one who is 71 and feeling quite healthy, it is hard to grasp that I have a 33 percent chance of dying within the next 10

years and an 80 percent chance of dying in the decade after that. But even if I live a long life, I'm likely to lose control of my body at some point. The rest of my life will be managed by others.

"Being Mortal," by surgeon Atul Gawande, provides a cold slap in the face about aging. Because society has become so medically sophisticated, we find it ever harder to accept that as people age, they wear out and die. Instead, Gawande writes, "The waning days of our life are given over to treatments that addle our brains and sap our bodies for a sliver's chance of benefit."

When I was a tot, my grandmother lived with my family. That was fairly common in the 1950s. But today, the vast majority of elderly people live on their own, and when they start having trouble taking care of themselves, too many are moved to "assisted living" or nursing facilities.

Unfortunately, many nursing homes feel like hospitals. Gawande describes how a woman "left an airy apartment she furnished herself for a small beige hospital-like room with a stranger for a roommate. Her belongings were stripped down to what she could fit into one cupboard and shelf they gave her.

"Basic matters, like when she went to bed, woke up, dressed, and ate, were subject to the rigid schedule of institutional life."

The vast majority of elderly are happier and healthier if they are able to remain in their own homes, Gawande believes. When the end nears, hospice is far superior to the agonizing attempts to prolong life with never-ending treatments.

Meanwhile, it's far less expensive to provide the elderly services at home than place them in a nursing home.

Thursday: The percentage of elderly is increasing dramatically in Pennsylvania, adding to the state's financial crisis.

