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DEFEND YOUR RESEARCH

You're Likely to Live Longer If You Retire After 65

An Interview with Chenkai Wu by Nicole Torres

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DEFEND YOUR RESEARCH

YOU'RE LIKELY TO LIVE LONGER IF YOU RETIRE AFTER 65

The research: Chenkai Wu, a PhD student in public health at Oregon State University, teamed up with OSU professors Robert Stawski and Michelle Odden and Colorado State's Gwenith Fisher to examine data from the Health and Retirement Study, a longitudinal survey of Americans age 50 and over. When they looked at the sample of 2,956 people who had begun participating in the study in 1992 and retired by 2010, the researchers found that the majority had retired around age 65. But a statistical analysis showed that when people retired at age 66 instead, their mortality rates dropped by 11%.

The challenge: Does work benefit us in unexpected ways? Is delayed retirement the secret to a longer life? **Mr. Wu, defend your research.**

Wu: That's the conclusion we are leaning toward. What's interesting is that we didn't find any sociodemographic, lifestyle, or health factors that affected the relationship between delayed retirement and a lower risk of dying. When we looked at just the unhealthy retirees in the sample—who accounted for 1,022 of the 2,956 participants—we still found that retiring one year later was associated with a 9% lower mortality risk.

HBR: What were some of the other factors that you controlled for? The typical variables—gender, ethnicity, age, education, marital status, and wealth. We also grouped people into three categories of occupations: white-collar jobs, service jobs, and blue-collar jobs. And we took into account more-detailed health- or lifestyle-related variables, like consumption of cigarettes and alcohol, exercise, body mass index, self-reported health ratings, and disabilities. Then we evaluated a number of chronic conditions, like diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease. We still found that retirement age was related to mortality, beyond all those variables.

How did you define retirement? We considered it to be the first year people responded to the survey saying they were "completely retired." For healthy people, the average age was right about 65, and the range was about age 53 to 78. For unhealthy people, the average age was only six months earlier, around age 64 and a half, and the range was about age 59 to 79.

Correlation isn't causation. So you're not necessarily saying working longer means you'll live longer? Right. You'd have a long way to go to prove causation—and I'm not even sure that you could. To prove causation, the gold standard would be to do a randomized control trial, and it's probably unethical and unrealistic to randomly assign people different retirement ages.

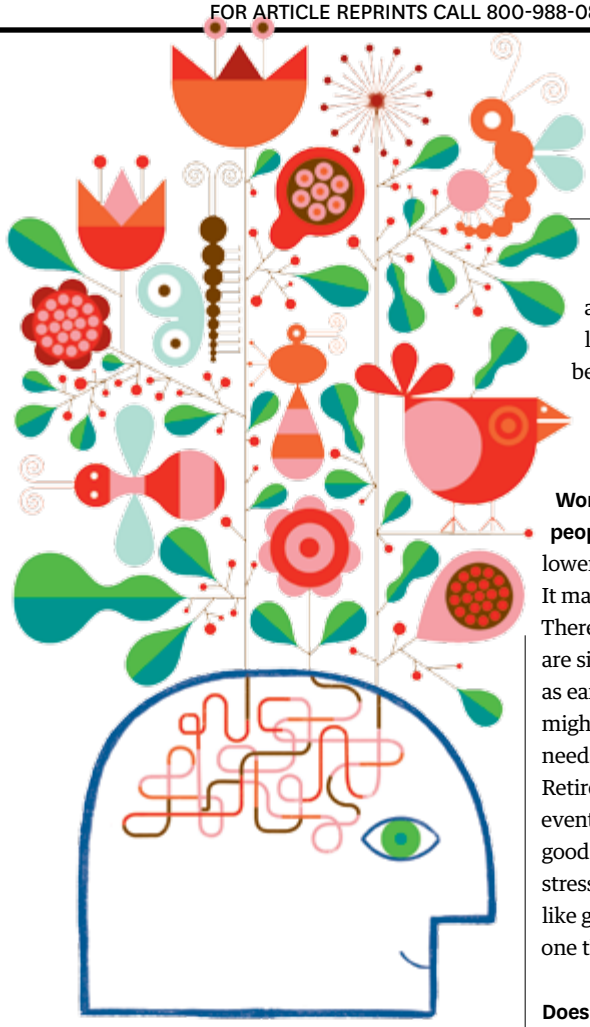
But should everyone delay retirement in hopes of living longer? A lot of people have framed this as "Retire early, die early; or retire late, die late." But that's not actually the main message we want to convey. What we really want people to think about is "What does work represent?" There are a lot of social benefits related to working: You're more active, you're more engaged, you're talking with your peers, and so on. Losing those when you retire can be harsh.

Has anyone else looked at this phenomenon? The literature on the relationship between retirement age and longevity is still developing. The findings are mixed. Most research shows that delayed retirement helps reduce mortality. A couple of studies show no relationship, and still others show that delayed retirement is detrimental or that early retirement is beneficial. We extended the previous research by accounting for the healthy-worker bias and by looking at a more representative sample. Other studies had narrow samples, like German firefighters or U.S. petrochemical workers.

Has the trend shifted toward retiring later? Only very recently. Until the past couple of years, we actually saw a trend toward early retirement in the U.S.

The United States is a perfect place to study this because Americans have the flexibility of retiring at any age they want—if they've saved enough money. In contrast, many European countries have a mandatory retirement age. I initially got interested in this research because of the recent debate over China's mandatory retirement laws.

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MELINDA BECK

The Chinese government is trying to raise the retirement age. I looked for data on the relationship between retirement age and health, but I couldn't find any.

Why would a later retirement affect longevity? Our theory is that a later retirement may actually delay when your physical and cognitive functioning starts to decline, because work keeps your mind and body active. If you stay active and socially engaged, it helps maintain your cognitive and physical abilities. It's definitely a future direction for this line of research. I'm interested in how people's physical and cognitive functions change over time. Older adults are a very heterogeneous group, so it would be interesting to see whether certain trajectories are beneficial or detrimental.

Another theory is that people's decisions about when to retire are shaped by many factors, including cultural and institutional norms. People will feel happier and more in control if they retire at an age consistent with what the culture of the country expects. In countries like the U.S., where work is highly valued and considered a necessary part of life, I think delayed retirement may be culturally desirable. Here, retiring "on time" might not be at 65; it may actually be a bit later.

Work can be stressful, though. Some people can't wait to retire. Well, the 11% lower death rate is the population average. It may not apply to any one individual. There are certain groups of people who are sick of work and just want to retire as early as possible. For them, doing so might be beneficial. But I think more work needs to be done to identify those groups. Retirement is often called a bittersweet event because it's a mix of bad things and good things. We believe that retirement is stressful, but that doesn't mean it's bad. It's like getting married—a happy event but one that can cause a lot of stress.

Does this possible benefit of delayed retirement help solve the problem of an aging workforce? Everyone tends to focus on whether delaying retirement is good for the economy or not. I think the lesson we want to convey is that we should also think about the health impact. Full-time work, which now means 40 hours a week or more, can be very stressful. But if people can have a slower transition into retirement, maybe working part-time or doing other activities, they'll stay active and socially engaged in a way that is beneficial to their health.

This sounds like good news for us Millennials, who often hear that we'll never get to retire. Cohorts are different. The people in the study were born between 1931 and 1941, so they're certainly different from Millennials. The takeaways are really not about the work or retirement age per se—they're about what those things mean. If you can find something that brings you the same benefits work does, that's what's important. ▼

Interview by **Nicole Torres**
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