What else may we distill from this mountain of statistics? Since there is a discrepancy between male and female longevity, more elderly women than elderly men may be expected to live alone. This is borne out by statistics. Globally, about 9% of males older than 60 live alone. More than twice as many women, 19%, over the age of 60 now live alone (in L’Enclos’ words: “Old age is woman’s hell.”). And does it matter in which nation one lives? In the poorer nations, a substantially smaller percent of the elderly live alone. Thus in the sub-Saharan nations the percent of elderly males living alone is about 6% and for elderly females, 11%. This may be interpreted variously as indicating that the poorer nations are more family-oriented, more concerned with their grandparents and therefore less likely to abandon them. Or, alternatively, that the poorer nations are too impoverished to build independent assisted-living facilities for their elderly.

Cicero (106-43 BCE) called old age “the crown of life, our play’s last act.” But neither the Romans, nor those who followed in the succeeding 19 centuries, lived much beyond age 60. Our knowledge of such burdens as Alzheimer’s disease is only one century old. Old age, for many, is no longer that golden interval when one may reflect upon the privileges of senility while admiring the antics of one’s grandchildren. Old age becomes a haven surrounded by peril where identity and cognition may depart prematurely. And when contemplating the fundamentals of old age, back again to Horace: “Grant me sound of body and of mind, to pass an old age lacking neither honor nor lyre.” And Seneca, his colleague (8 BCE – 65) declaring: “Old age is an incurable disease.”

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Disclosure of Financial Interests

Stanley M. Aronson, MD, and spouse/significant other have no financial interests to disclose.

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