Imagine yourself sitting on a mat floor as a school going child conversing with a person over one hundred years old. You are almost 13,000 miles from the United States where the three oceans meet and surrounded by spice mountains, plush forest, and you are within a maze of backwaters. You are in the southwestern part of India. Kerala, India, also known as “God’s own country.” I have visited this area every summer for the past ten years and I would like to share my observations of some of the centenarians in the area and their ‘secrets of long life’. As a social worker, I am keenly intrigued with the relationship between their longevity and life styles.

Every summer I offer a summer study abroad course called ‘India Experience’ to social work students and professionals. We trek to Kerala, India (www.csuohio.edu/india_experience). This area is known as the “spice capital of the world”, “Venice of Asia” and “god’s own country”. National Geographic Travel Magazine named Kerala as one of the “fifty places to visit in a life time”. According to Anthropologists Kerala is one of the few places in the world where the matriarchal family systems still exists. A recent United Nation’s study identified this as the only place in the world with an almost perfect literacy rate. The infant mortality rate is lower than some of the cities in the United States and there is a vibrant alternative health system. One of the things that fascinate me about India is the aging population. Respect for the aged is deeply rooted in this culture. The use of honorific language and courteous manners is widely observed in these cultures while addressing elders.

Today, as I prepare for my next trip to Kerala, I want to tell you about these people—to honor their ways such that we may learn from them. Rather than telling you about a day in my life, I want to tell you about factors in their day-to-day lives that I believe have contributed to their longevity.

Some of the recent research on centenarians include the Okinawa Centenarian Study, New England Centenarian Study, Georgia Centenarian Study, Swedish Centenarian Study and Human Longevity and Aging Research of the National Institute on Aging. These studies seem to focus more on genes and the impact of modern medical innovations as the main factors of centenarians.

Over the years I have been interacting with centenarians, from different strata of the community, to obtain qualitative data on the secret of long life. My interest is more on the impact of life styles on longitivity. As I ventured out to interview this population group in
India, I am more and more convinced that the breakthrough in modern medicine is alone not the primary factor to the secret of long life.

My case studies on centenarians mainly focus on variables such as the social, culture, familial, spiritual, dietary habits, socialization patterns, feeling of worthiness, physical and mental exercises. Several of these factors are transferable to our society in working with the senior elders.

Even the poorest interview subjects have valuable traits within their life styles, which allow them to live healthy lives. In eastern cultures such as India, respecting elders and their practice wisdom is very much a factor in the day-to-day activities of the people. These elders may or may not be related to a person. Societal respect to this population group is a way of life. In these types of traditional cultures, elders stay with their extended family members. Relatives and the neighbors make sure that these elders’ needs are taken care of on a proper way. Children look upon the elders to learn oral histories and practice wisdoms which are generally passed on from one generation to another.

The longest continuously living civilization in the world today exists in India. There are thousands of years of oral history communicated from one generation to another through the close interaction of young and old. Many lessons on ethics, morality and clean living are transmitted in the form of poems. Animals, birds, trees and nature are common elements of these ancient stories which live on through the youth.

While I was interviewing these centenarians, I was careful not to be preoccupied with time. Like in any culture, my subjects like to tell incidents after incidents they have encountered in their life. Some are positive and others are negative. As I listened to their stories, they reflected a similar growth or maturation process.

There are several common factors I was able to identify, irrespective of these centenarians socio-economic status, which are common factors of their long life. I did not see a pattern of siblings and parents living a long life among these centenarians.

Let me share with you some of these factors:

**Positive Attitude:** Leading a stress free life style is very much a part of their day to day activities. Every single one of my subjects exhibited an aura of optimism in their conversation. This is very much visible in both their verbal and non verbal communication with people around them. A smiling face is always visible and it is more or less expected that others around them also project the same expression of outward happiness. They are happy with their life and are hopeful about the future. Even if others observe negative events in the centenarians’ life, such as the death of a family member or illness, financial difficulties etc to a close person, the centenarians have a tendency to bounce back from that situation very quickly. Long term mourning is not visible among these individuals. They tend to develop positive outlooks in negative situations. Moreover, they try to instill this quality among the people they associate with on a daily basis. If they come across people that are pessimistic in their outlook, first they try to
steer them to positive way of thinking; if they are not successful, they tend to avoid them in a nonspecific pattern of exclusion from their close categories of contacts. Staying young has a lot to do with lifestyle and independence. They do not want to be dependent on others. Every day they wake up in the morning with a new set of goals to accomplish.

**Physical and mental exercise:** Poor and rich alike, these centenarians, from the time they get up in the morning until they are ready to sleep, they are constantly involved in some form of physical or mental activity. They keep themselves physically and mentally active at all times. There is nothing called ‘boring’ in their daily routine. You never observe them sitting in one place for an extended period of time. Walking around is very much a part of their lifestyle. They project a lot of positive energy to others as well. They are always doing something such as cleaning the place around them, walking, gardening, cooking, sight seeing etc. Sometimes to an outsider, their activities may not look productive. They are never lonely or stay alone for extended periods of time—however, they do seek their own space. They have a true sense of life. To stay alert mentally, they are involved in reading, writing, memorization etc. For example several of them are constantly learn new new things. Sometimes simple things such as memorizing telephone numbers, birthdates, special event dates or several Sanskrit poems. Two of the centenarians could even recite multiplication tables from one to fifty nine. One centenarian even recited to my American social work students The Gettysburg Address.

**Eating habits:** Most of my subjects are vegetarians. They consume freshly picked vegetables and fruits. Sprouted items are common in their diet. They can easily identify vegetables and fruits with healing qualities. They seldom eat refrigerated items. Every day they eat at the same times, regularly and in little quantities (no one is able to tempt them with larger portions, even if it is their favorite), and they do not involve themselves in lengthy conversation while eating. Eating slowly and concentrating is very much a part of their routine. For instance, they say ‘each time you put food in the mouth we need to chew it thirty two times, one for each tooth’. They consume large quantities of water, surprisingly warm water boiled with a herbal seed “cumin” (but not while they eat). Several types of spices and herbs are part of their diet. Even if they need to travel to other places, they insist on eating at their regular times. They make it a point of not to sleep or lie down at least two hours after they eat.

**Traditional Healing practices:** These centenarians are very proud to identify their traditional healing practices as one of the main secrets of longevity. Naturopathy, yoga, herbs and spices are identified as some of these healing practices. For example, most of these elders awake in the morning at least one hour before sun rise and does ‘sun gazing’. Early morning walking, meditation, yoga, including breathing exercise, cold water bathing etc are part of their daily rituals.

**Feeling of worthiness:** Doing good things for others is paramount to this group of people. Instead of expecting anything in return, they are always eager to assist others, relatives, friends or even strangers. Giving advice and narrating their positive life styles to others are part of their daily routine. It is part of the traditions to respect the elders.
These elders, even if others are not seeking anything, young and old alike, receive advice on all types of things such as: interpersonal relationships, dietary habits, financial security, spirituality etc. Neighbors invite the senior most elders among their midst to birthdays, marriages, birth of new babies and other happy occasions. Receiving blessings from these elders are seen with great pride. People bow in front of these elders by keeping their hands together and touching the feet of the elders’ as a blessing. Their ‘practice wisdoms’ are highly honored. Some of the other characteristic features include: they laugh at all times, they are very friendly, they behave like children, they develop good support networks and extended family members and friends visit them often. There is a high number of well wishers surrounding these centenarians. These elders got an answer for all your questions. They insist it comes with their ‘practice wisdom’.

**Socialization pattern:** Feeling comfortable and friendly with others, including strangers is a landmark of these centenarians. They feel comfortable socializing with people from different age groups. They try to keep up to date on what is happening locally, nationally and internationally. They are always willing to learn new things. For example, a centenarian on her 106th birthday, registered to learn computers at a local school. Interacting with children and teenagers, by telling them oral histories and participating in outdoor activities are an integral part of their life styles. They never feel shy and are always seen as extravert in their interaction with others. They are willing to express their feelings very freely to others. Physical or mental limitations of these elders do not make them ‘slow-down’.

**Spirituality:** ‘Believe in something beyond what you know’ is very common among this group. Every day when they wake up, before their meal, before involvement in any auspicious occasions, and before going to sleep, they take few minutes of their time to pray. They believe in some form of ‘divinity’ which is not known to human beings. Equating their secrets of long life to some one ‘divine’ is commonly expressed. They are willing to share the concept of spirituality to others.

**Implications for social workers interested in working with aging population:**

Recent U.S. Census data (2002) indicates that there are now more than 58,000 centenarians living in the United States, with a projected increase to 1,095,000 by the year 2050. Social workers may encounter aging population during their career. Learning from them will be a challenge, especially their practice wisdom. Factors for long life expectancy include features beyond genetic disposition and advancement in medicine. Social workers can play a major role in the field of gerontology by concentrating on the life style patterns of seniors and learning from traditions. Cultural understandings of the elders are an important factor for social workers in working with the aging population.

As I look back at all we have learned from these centenarians, I look forward to taking a new group of social work students to Kerala this summer.
Suggested Reading


Interesting websites on Centenarians

The Okinawa Centenarian Study: Evidence based gerontology
world's longest life expectancy, health, successful aging due to lifestyle.
www.okinawaprogram.com/study.

New England Centenarian Study
The New England Centenarian Study’s mission is to study centenarians who we believe carry the secrets to successful aging and how to delay or even escape ...
www.bumc.bu.edu/Dept/Home.aspx?DepartmentID=361

The Georgia Centenarian Study
University of Georgia Gerontology Center research on the conditions and needs of those who reach the age of 100 and beyond.
www.geron.uga.edu/research/centenarianstudy.php

Health Report - 22/02/1999: Centenarian Study
A group of researchers at Harvard Medical School have been trying to find out what it takes to reach the age of 100 or more.
www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/8.30/healthrpt/stories/s19117.htm

Gerontology Research Group Centenarian Study
Overview of scientific research throughout the world. Includes a photo gallery and comprehensive tables of known super centenarians.
www.grg.org/calment.htm

The New England Centenarian Study Welcomes You!
Currently, there are probably about 50000 centenarians in the United States, or a little more than 1 centenarian per 10000 in the population (the above ... www.med.harvard.edu/programs/necs/centenarians.htm
**Centenarian Study**

These characteristics make centenarians an ideal group of people for the study of specific genes that are either directly associated with longevity or ...


**Live Longer Increase Life Span Ways Centenarian Study Live Longer ...**


International Centenarian Study. Georgia Centenarian Image For a brief history of the International Centenarian Consortium from 1989-2004, please visit our ...

[www.geron.uga.edu/research/intlcentenarianstudy.php](http://www.geron.uga.edu/research/intlcentenarianstudy.php)

**Blackwell Synergy: J Am Geriatr Soc, Vol 0, Issue 0, pp ...**

The Japanese Centenarian Study: Autonomy Was Associated with Health ... The Swedish centenarian study found that good vision was a predictor of good ...


**The Swedish centenarian study: A multidisciplinary study of five ...**

Centenarians born 1887-91, who lived in southern Sweden were asked to participate in this multidisciplinary study(N=164). Of the survivors(N=143), ...

[cat.inist.fr/?aModele=afficheN&cpsidt=2116314](http://cat.inist.fr/?aModele=afficheN&cpsidt=2116314)

**USATODAY.com - Scientists study centenarians for clues to long life**

Scientists study centenarians for clues to long life By Alan Marler, AP Juanita Ollman, 100, shares a dance with son-in-law Burley Hendricks inside her ...


**The Swedish Centenarian Study: a multidisciplinary study of five ...**

Centenarians born 1887-91, who lived in southern Sweden were asked to participate in this multidisci...


**Living to 100: What’s the Secret?**

File Format: PDF/Adobe Acrobat - View as HTML.

Centenarian Studies. There are a dozen or so centenarian studies. A health-advice book has been published based on. findings from the centenarian study in ...

[wifle.org/pdf/Living_to_100.pdf](http://wifle.org/pdf/Living_to_100.pdf)

**Human Longevity and Aging Research**

In the Centenarian Study, data on 444 centenarian families and over 2000 siblings will provide information on factors that support extreme longevity and ...

[www.nia.nih.gov/AboutNIA/BudgetRequests/HLAgingResearch.htm](http://www.nia.nih.gov/AboutNIA/BudgetRequests/HLAgingResearch.htm)

I would like to thank my colleague Todd Pesek, M.D., Director, Center for Healing Across Cultures, Cleveland State University for his valuable suggestions.

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