

Physical activity and successful aging

Report on the 10th International EGREPA Conference in Cologne, Germany,
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Congratulations to Prof. Heinz Mechling and his team of the German Sport University at Cologne! They staged an excellent, well-organized conference, which attracted more than 300 participants from 30 countries worldwide. The scientific contents of the conference were high level, the abstracts book was well conceived, and the cultural program offered certainly gave everyone a chance to learn what “Kölsch” is all about, among other things. A relaxed and friendly spirit among the participants was another feature of this meeting. And those of us who wondered whether or not a man aged 98 years can still do a series of chin-ups by the sole use of his middle fingers hooked to a wire cable were given a stunning answer by the Thuranos during the closing ceremony.

The overall theme of the conference, successful aging and the role of physical activity, was highlighted by several speakers. UM Staudinger (International University Bremen, Germany) looked at successful aging from the point of view of life span psychology and defined the predictors of “successful” aging using both objective criteria, where lifestyle choices are crucial, and subjective ones, where, e.g., social interaction and motivation improve cognitive functioning. U Lindenberger (Max Planck Institute for Human Development, Berlin, Germany) gave an excellent review of the sensorimotor–cognitive interdependencies in old age and pointed to the role of aerobic and resistance training as a means of improving the course of cognitive aging. MET McMurdo (University of Dundee, Scotland), although speaking about fall prevention, outlined the

accepted aims of successful aging, i.e., the maintenance of health, independent living, and social participation. Several presentations were then devoted to the role of physical activity in successful aging, to moderators of the types of aging, barriers and supporting factors of regular exercise, and determinants of the maintenance of physical activity.

Not surprisingly, fall prevention in the elderly was a prominent topic at the conference. The topic was looked at from a number of different angles, ranging from the role of fitness, exercise balance and coordination training, gait analysis, and the role of morbidity in falls to practical programs of fall prevention. C Becker (Robert Bosch Hospital, Stuttgart) pointed out that the annual number of hip fractures has risen by more than 20% during the last 5 years in Germany and that more than 10,000 nursing home admissions are caused by a fall, annually, giving rise to costs exceeding 1 billion Euros. Thus, the “Ulm model” of fall prevention (U Lindemann, Robert Bosch Hospital), the fall prevention program cooperation project in Hamburg (D Adamczewsky, University of Hamburg), or the comprehensive fall prevention program in residential care facilities in the North Rhine district area (A Icks, North-Rhine Chamber of Physicians), among others, was of special interest.

JA Duarte (University of Porto, Portugal) presented a state-of-the-art lecture on muscle aging. Age-related sarcopenia is not a process of primary muscle degeneration. It is characterized by a loss of motor units and strongly depends on neuropathic changes with increasing age, i.e., neuronal death, dendritic thinning, and a decrease in neurotransmitters. Physical activity appears to counteract these processes to some extent. This was followed up by a series of presentations on motor aging and the effects of aerobic and resistance training on fitness, health, and well-being. Exercise regimes were presented both in theory and in practical sessions.

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This conference was remarkably successful in two more ways. First, it was attended by many young scientists who presented their work. Obviously, the field of physical activity and aging is gaining momentum, and research in this area is now well accepted as a worth-while area of scientific endeavor also by the young generation of scientists.

Second, this European Group for Research into Elderly and Physical activity (EGREPA) meeting not only reported on new results from research, but it also served as a welcome and useful European platform by presenting important ongoing or coming projects such as the European

Network for Action on Aging and Physical Activity (M Hopman-Rock, A. Rütten, E. Freiberger et al.), the Prevention of Falls Network Europe (C Becker), the Integration of Handicapped Persons through adapted physical activity (APA) in Romania (V Marcu et al.), and the European Master Programme in Adapted Physical Activity for Older Persons (H van Coppenolle). Certainly, a promising future! Promising for the elderly in Europe and all over the world, promising for the acceptance of further research necessities and for better European coordination as a challenge for the EGREPA and its future conferences.