

Hope and Hype Dealing with Uncertainty in the Field of Anti-Aging Medicine

Larissa Pfaller (University of Erlangen-Nürnberg) & Mark Schweda (University of Göttingen)

Background

The identification of risk factors and the development of preventive strategies are medical practices which are generally directed towards the future and the autonomous management of one's future medical fate. As a matter of fact, however, the future remains open and defies any definitive prediction and control.

In the booming field of anti-aging medicine, this dilemma becomes particularly evident: Aging is construed in terms of future health risks, and various strategies of medical intervention are offered. At the same time, the efficacy of anti-aging interventions is still rather dubious and contested, on an individual as well as on a scientific level, thus casting doubts on the actual scope of users' autonomy and responsibility.

Aims of Anti-aging

Vincent (2006)

Symptom alleviation



Cosmetic (anti-wrinkle cream) prophylactic (exercise and diet or vitamin pills) compensatory (Viagra)

Life expectancy extension



Fighting diseases related to old age and increasing the years that can be spent without disease

Lifespan extension



Open the possibility of greatly extended human longevity

Abolition



Change the fundamentals of biological aging for eliminating aging and for the creation of immortality

Ethical Problem

The development of anti-aging medicine stands for an increasing hype of individual prevention and autonomous biomedical life plans for aging, but also creates new ethical problems of decision making under uncertainty that need to be explored and analyzed.

Its orientation towards the future opens a space of indeterminateness that can be a gateway for illusionary promises and improper medical treatments undermining the promise of increased autonomy.

Therefore, the perspectives of providers and users and their ways of decision making and dealing with uncertainty are highly relevant for the ethical assessment of anti-aging interventions.

Methodological Approach

Data Collection (state 2011)

Practitioners:

- Expert interviews (7)
- Websites
- Congresses

Users:

- Narrative interviews (15)
- Focus groups (10)

Analysis

We analyze the data material in order to reconstruct the practitioners' (discourse-analysis) and users' (sequence analytic methods) perceptions of the future and future health in the context of anti-aging medicine.

Results

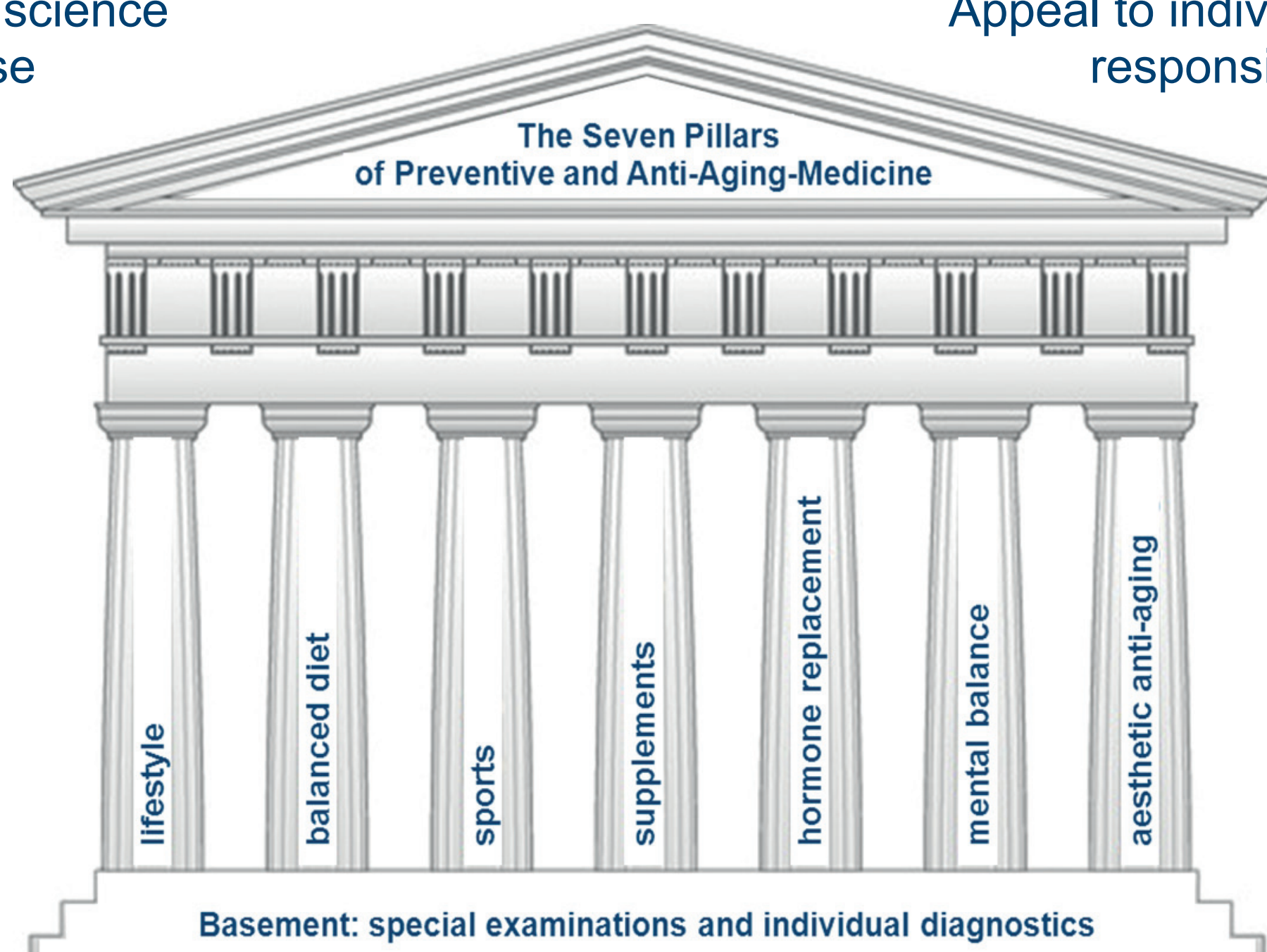
Practitioners
„Anti-aging is a question of lifestyle“
Strategies of promoting anti-aging

Expertocracy

Authority of science and expertise

Responsibilization

Appeal to individual responsibility



found on: www.gsaam.de, German Society of Anti-Aging Medicine, translated by project

Example: Analyzing websites – the temple of anti-aging

Users

„Anti-aging is a field of uncertainty“
Strategies of dealing with uncertainties

Medical optimism

Trust in science and expertise

„I think you can definitely buy lifetime when you behave correctly and use the whole scope of technological, medical possibilities... And if you are really optimistic, you can assume that research will be much further in 20 years“

„One has to lead a self-determined life and take one's fate in one's own hands, and the tools to do so are technology, medicine and so on. And that's why I trust in these things.“

„But I am not that afraid of fragility since I think I can do a lot against it“

Example: Analyzing narrative interviews – the users of anti-aging

Preventive maximalism

In case of doubt - play it safe

„If it actually has any effect or not, I don't know, I cannot tell.“

„Of course, it is in your hands... But you never know how much it actually brings about. Sure, you can do it, but I think only to the extent that is good for your well-being. Because if you had to abstain from everything or do something that does not suit you, that would be stupid. Just to live maybe a year longer. And you never know if it really effects that one year.“

Conclusions

- Anti-aging practices directly negotiated between practitioners and individual users - intermediary, regulatory or controlling instances (e.g. professional associations, health insurance, or state) are eliminated.
- Practitioner-perspective*: Anti-aging directed at commercial profit and promoted by strategies such as reference to scientific expertise and appeals to individual responsibility.
- User-perspective*: Anti-aging surrounded by uncertainties provoking coping strategies such as trust in scientific progress or rational choice-approaches to decisions under uncertainty.
- Making life plans and healthcare decisions based on lacking regulation, ambiguous information and strong emotional involvement can lead to unwarranted "medical optimism" and "preventive maximalism" which undermine autonomy and put users at risk of commercial exploitation, psychological disappointment and unsafe medical procedures.

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