

Guest Voices: Michael Birt on Designing Healthy Longevity

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“Find a way.” That’s what Diana Nyad told herself, with every stroke, as she attempted to become the first person to swim 110 miles from Cuba to Florida without a shark cage. It took her 53 hours of continuous swimming. When she walked ashore she was delirious, her face and body swollen from hypothermia and countless jellyfish stings. Most amazingly Diana Nyad was 64 years old when she accomplished this record feat. She found a way.

Unfortunately, for many others at 64 years old, life’s challenges are very different. Why is that? How does one person accomplish a great feat at 64, while others are infirm, unmotivated or overwhelmed?

The search for an answer to those questions has become a major focus for scientists and healthcare professionals in the longevity field. You may have heard the adage that “Age is just a number.” Well, it turns out that chronological age may even be a wrong number in terms of helping us stay healthy as we age. Two Stanford University scientists recently wrote, “Because the rate of aging varies immensely among individuals, humans become increasingly different

from each other with age. Thus, chronological age fails to provide an accurate indicator of the aging process.”

Whoa! This flies in the face of one of our dominant cultural stereotypes that we become more alike as we age (think: “Old people are....” fill in the blank). But emerging science is telling us, convincingly, that we become more different as we grow older.

This forces us to look at longevity with very different eyes. As individuals, we know we’re different from one another. But the science of longevity is now telling us that we need to have a much better understanding of human variability if we are to design our lives to be healthy and long. To treat us, our doctor will need to know much more about our genetic makeup, our physiology, our environment, our behavior, and—crucially—our mindset.

To explore this challenge, we invited 25 of America’s leading thinkers and doers to a meeting in early February co-hosted by the National Academy of Medicine and the Personal Connected Health Alliance. We met at the historic and beautiful National Academy of Sciences building in Washington, D.C., with the bust of Albert Einstein in the lobby to remind us what great science can do to expand the frontiers of human knowledge.

Our theme for the brainstorming session was “Designing Healthy Longevity.” We noted that healthy longevity begins with good science, based on a precise understanding of each of us, not just chronological age. We need to know each person from end to end—from biology to behavior to beliefs. And it needs to be personal. Aging may be a universal human process, but it is a unique personal experience. We need to factor that fundamental reality into everything we do. Lastly, we need to be connected. That starts with being socially connected and engaged. But technology can and will play a crucial role. Emerging technologies that combine artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning and natural language processing will soon make our ability to connect in a “frictionless” manner an everyday, everywhere experience.

We asked our participants to do some homework. One of the assigned journal articles begins, “Aging societies represent the triumph of science and technology over premature death.” The 20th century provided human society a “longevity dividend” of over 30 years in the form of extended life expectancy. That was a gift of *quantity*. The challenge for us in the 21st century is to add quality through *healthy* longevity. For innovators and entrepreneurs, this challenge offers astounding potential to make a difference in the world by harnessing human creativity and collaboration to “design” products and services to help people live a longer, healthier life.

Diana Nyad propelled herself toward her dream with the words, “find a way.” These words are just as powerful for us in the longevity field. The science and technology exists to change the longevity game. We must find a way. I invite you to join us in the effort to design healthy longevity. After all, what could be better than living a longer, healthier life?

About the Author



Michael Birt designs programs and partnerships that promote healthy longevity for people around the world. Based in Seattle, he has traveled extensively in support of the health and life sciences fields in Asia, Europe as well as the United States. He is a successful veteran of the .com, .org and .edu worlds. One of his current roles is Senior Advisor to the Academy for Healthy Longevity with the HIMSS/Personal Connected Health Alliance. Prior to that, he served in several academic roles that included founding Director of the Biodesign Center for Sustainable Health at Arizona State University from 2009 to 2016, Research Professor from 2009 to 2016, and Interim Co-director of ASU's Biodesign Institute in 2010-2011.

He was also the founding Executive Director of the Pacific Health Summit and launched the Center for Health and Aging at the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR), while serving as an Affiliate Investigator at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center. His career also includes experience in the private sector. He co-founded a leading US-Asia biomedical business development company and has consulted for many of the world's leading healthcare, medical technology, and consumer product companies. He did his undergraduate work at the University of Washington and has a PhD from Princeton University in East Asian Studies. He speaks and reads Japanese fluently.

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