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Ten reasons to be cheerful, part 8: Health [1]

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Some people suggest that people will be less healthy in the future because they lead unhealthy lifestyles and eat the wrong foods. I rather think people will be healthier in future, and I think so because of developments taking place that should bring it about.

8. Health

Vast amounts of government money is spent on making us feel miserable about our health. Advertisements bombard us with messages that treat salt as a kind of poison, and sugar as almost as bad. We are warned off fatty foods like butter and cream, and urged to cut alcohol consumption. Shrill tones blare the dangers of obesity. The message is to treat food as medicine.

All of this probably has the effect of making life more stressful by having people worry about what they are eating and drinking, and stress is undoubtedly a factor in many illnesses. Despite all of these daily dangers we are told about, life expectancy is rising, and healthy life expectancy along with it.

People are healthier than they were. Children are not disfigured by smallpox or polio, and tuberculosis can be treated. Most of the illnesses which were regarded as acts of nature are now avoided by efficient sanitation and hygiene. Typhoid no longer threatens us, and such outbreaks as there are of virulent diseases are quickly contained and brought under control.

It is true that we have faced new ailments such as BSE and HIV, but we have mobilized resources rapidly and developed preventive measures or treatments. I have no doubt that the remaining big killer, malaria, will be conquered and will be made as extinct as smallpox.

Fewer of our children die in infancy, and fewer mothers die in childbirth. The same progress that enabled us to deal with life-threatening conditions is still being made. Indeed, it is accelerating. The decoding of the human genome will being in its wake a new series of tailor-made treatments aimed at specific genetic conditions, and the ability to manipulate stem cells will enable replacement organs to be made and substituted for defective ones.

Along with all of this comes a greater awareness among the population of what it takes to stay healthy. People know the health risks of smoking cigarettes, and alter their behaviour in the light of knowledge. They are beginning to learn the value of exercise.

The future will see more diseases conquered and life expectancy prolonged. People will be healthier for longer, and we can only hope that they worry less about it.

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