

## (Meno)Pausing to Plan a Life

By Diana G. Mendoza

**F**elicidad Canta's favourite time of day is 10 a.m., specially so if she's in the malls. There are few people at this hour, so she can explore the bookstores and relax.

At 60, she is a retired public school teacher with five grandchildren. "I missed out on a lot of things when I was younger. Bookstores were among my favourite places but I was just too busy to spend time for myself." But now she's catching up. And she still has a lot of loving and nurturing to do, living as she does with her husband and the youngest of their three children, who is married and has a two-year-old baby.

### Retirement

By the time she actually retired, she had already accepted that old age had begun. Thirteen years ago, at the time of her menopause, Canta started "planning a life" for herself, which would include, she jested, "living in a bookstore."

Not all women her age would think or act this way. "I don't intend to grow old and grey," she declared.

"Literally, you pause," was her description of the inevitable biological process and the accompanying "trauma" of having to undergo disturbing changes in the body and mind brought about by the onset of ageing. But having survived menopause, Canta said the only important thing now is to live the rest of her life the way she had wanted and planned it to be.

For her, menopause was a time to let go. Health and behavioural experts agree, but add that it is a phase of life that women have yet to understand better.

### Signs of Menopause

Dr. Shelley de Vega, head of the geriatrics unit of the University of the Philippines-Philippine General Hospital (UP-PGH) and associate professor of clinical gerontology at the University of the Philippines' medical college, noted that in the developed countries, women are advised to look young and maintain an active sex life even after menopause. This is not the case in the Philippines and other developing countries.

"When Filipino women age, they seem to be held in high esteem. They are mothers, grandmothers, teachers. It is hard to educate women about menopause because we can't discuss this openly," she said.

Menopause is the cessation of menstruation, which generally occurs when a woman is in her 40s. In the beginning it is characterised by the shortening of the menstrual cycle to 24 days, accompanied by occasional bleeding and spotting.

When a woman no longer menstruates, she no longer produces ovum. Upon birth, a female is supposed to have between 450,000 to 500,000 hormones called estrogen and progesterone, and the production of these are dependent on ovulation.

About eight out of 10 women experience hot flushes—sudden warmth in the face, neck

and chest lasting for several minutes accompanied by reddening of the skin. Others may experience heavy perspiration, dizziness and palpitations when they become stressed or excited.

The tissues of the genital organs undergo degenerative changes—the vagina shortens, becomes narrow, dry and less elastic. These make the vagina more susceptible to infection and intercourse can be painful. The uterus also shrinks, affecting the urinary tract. Muscle structures of the uterus, bladder and rectum lose tone and strength, explaining why older women may be incontinent.

### Hormone Replacement Therapy

Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) is a novel way of easing the discomforts of menopause such as hot flushes, mood swings, dry skin and painful intercourse. While HRT could prevent osteoporosis and heart disease, it could increase the risk of breast cancer especially for women with a family history. A recent U.S. cancer study featured in *Time* magazine revealed that estrogen plus progestin—the most commonly prescribed form of HRT, may increase one's breast cancer risk by eight percent a year, vs. one percent for women taking estrogen alone. This risk, plus the high cost of HRT, could limit its usage by Filipino women.

### Osteoporosis

Another disease that afflicts older women is osteoporosis, the loss of bone mass. Because their bones become brittle, it is not unusual for older women to break their hips or wrists. The vertebrae also weaken, causing back pain and gradual loss of height. Then there are the joint and muscle pains of arthritis, a disorder that can affect even young adults.

With these physical changes, menopausal women become irritable, partly due to lack of sleep caused by hormonal changes. They also feel depressed because menopause reminds them of the loss of fertility, sex appeal and sexual urge, not to mention the appearance of wrinkles on their skin.

The so-called midlife crisis comes about when a woman is pressured by society to remain young, vibrant and wrinkle-free. Moreover, not only does she have to confront physical changes. It is also a time of realization that her children are now adults with lives of their own.

“A better understanding of menopause is a woman's responsibility towards herself. There are new methods of diminishing some of the effects of the ageing process, and menopause can now be an age [of] promise,” said an article in *Healthbeat*, a news magazine published by the Philippine government's Department of Health (DOH).



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### Health Services for the Older People

Older persons are expected to be much sicker, Dr. De la Vega said, so there must be a health system that will protect them against the burden of chronic disease.

“The Philippines has a young population, and health services to older people are not adequate. But we should now prepare for the increase of older persons in 10 years’ time,” she said.

The 1995 Philippine census showed that there were 3.7 million persons aged 60 and above or 5.4 percent of the population with a mean life expectancy of 68 years (66 for males and 70 for females). By 2005, there will be 5.2 million older people. By 2020, older persons will account for 10.3 percent of the total population.

Dr. Ponciano Aberin, who heads the Department of Health’s unit for older people, said the government provided this year a trickle of P1 million for health services for older people.

“We are conscious that the population of older people will increase 10 years from now, that is why our approach is to prevent degenerative and chronic diseases. With our scant resources, we hope to manage the problem by the time this new pattern emerges,” he said.

Ageing people must be conscious of their health, De la Vega said. “Filipinos are still generally misinformed about health matters. For example, back pains are accepted as a normal complaint that comes with age, not knowing that this could be a symptom of something more serious.”

The DOH is conducting an aggressive campaign to encourage women of all ages to avail of the Women’s Health and Safe Motherhood Program at the *barangay* (community) health centres. Its Sentrong Sigla incentive programme helps to achieve health services goals that address women’s health throughout life.

There are services for older women, such as a menopause clinic at the UP-PGH that was established in 1991. The state-run Jose Reyes Memorial Medical Center opened its own clinic in 1999. Vaccinations for older people against pneumonia and influenza are now available.

Besides the UP-PGH, geriatric services are also offered by the East Avenue Medical Center and Veterans Memorial Medical Center. Private and non-government institutions caring for older people are slowly expanding, and medical practitioners have begun to choose this specialisation. Schools of medicine and public health have introduced geriatric studies since 1996.

However, society, especially families, must continue to uphold and promote traditional values of respect and support for older people in the face of rapid urbanisation, greater involvement of women in the workforce, the growing gap between generations and changing attitudes and behaviour.

“Families must avoid committing old people to institutions because this will increase the cost of providing continuing care,” Aberin cautioned. “Many of the needs of the older people are social in nature rather than medical.”

Source: Women’s Feature Service-Manila, week ending 28 April 2000