

The prospect that the elderly will account for an unprecedented proportion of society will demand from Canadians unprecedented responses across the political, economic and social spectrum. It will affect the approach to health care, with, among other things, greater emphasis accorded to the prevention of, and care of those with chronic disease. More flexible retirement policies and alternative living arrangements will become increasingly desirable. It will be necessary to learn how best to take full advantage of the experience and energies of a larger cohort of healthy older people who are equipped to make a valuable contribution in the workplace and in other fields. Innovations in pension strategies will be inevitable. Above all, stereotypes about the place of older people will need to be replaced by attitudes and policies favouring new and creative roles for them in the Canadian society of the future. At the level of government, and among opinion-makers generally, the challenges involved in addressing this profound demographic change effectively are receiving increasingly systematic attention.

Quebec, for its part, will be faced with another considerable challenge. If birth rates remain at current levels, and if the numbers of immigrants from the various countries of origin received there remain the same in the medium and long term, the resultant ethno-cultural diversification will present a major challenge to the province in terms of language.

Mortality

Over the decade 1980-90, the mortality rate fell by an average of 1.5 percent annually for men and 1.3 percent in the case of women. This has yielded a current life expectancy of 74 years for men, and 81 years for women. The comparable figures in 1931 were 61 and 64. Since 1950, infant mortality has declined steeply. From a level of 41.5 per thousand, it currently stands at about six deaths per thousand live births.

Among Canadian adults, the majority of deaths are due to chronic diseases. Coronary heart disease ranks first, followed among men by lung cancer and stroke; and, among women, by stroke and breast cancer. Lung cancer remains one of the leading preventable causes of death in Canada. Reflecting the changes in smoking habits between men and women, deaths due to lung cancer have shown little change during the past decade; although death rates for men have been declining slightly but regularly, female deaths due to lung cancer are on the rise. Generally speaking, mortality due to chronic disease has decreased over the past 15 years. Exceptions to this trend include deaths due to malignant melanoma and prostate cancer. Among respiratory illnesses, pneumonia is the chief cause of death.

