In an interview by The Futurist, a journal published by the World Future Society, Albert Rosenfeld, former science editor for Life and author of the recent book, Prolongevity, made some rather optimistic remarks about aging:

"What's basically new is that an increasing number of gerontologists have come to believe that aging is a genetic program, that the end of life is genetically built into its very beginning. If aging does prove to be genetically determined, then it's a fair assumption that we can discover what the program is and how it works. Once you understand how any process works, in detail, you can then manipulate that mechanism for your own benefit—speed it up, slow it down, stop it, do whatever you want with it!! (Will Life begin at 140?" The Futurist Vol. XI, No. 1, Page 19, February, 1977)

The same issue of The Futurist carries a companion article by Rosenfeld, wherein he states boldly:

"I will venture to predict that by the year 2025—if research proceeds at reasonable speed—most of the major mysteries of the aging process will have been solved, and the solutions adopted as part of conventional biomedical knowledge; and that some of the solutions will by then already have come into practical use to stave off the ravages of senescence." (Prolongevity: the "Extension of the Human Life Span," Page 15)

For Rosenfeld the search for the key to the control of aging should be an adventure into which we enter with high glee. Granted there may be some advantages which, for him, include visiting countries one had not had the opportunity to visit previously, going through different careers and marriages, learning new languages, learning to play a variety of musical instruments, and having the opportunity to "create some truly marvelous syntheses of the sciences and mathematics and the arts and the social sciences and religions and ethics and aesthetics and so on." ("Will Life begin at 140?" The Futurist, Page 21).

The significant extension of the human life span hardly appears immediately as an unalloyed good.

Demographers have noted that the available evidence support the position that the absolute human life span has not changed during the time of recorded history. There appears to be a maximum in the range of 125-150 years which a human can live. What has changed notably in the recent decades is that more people are living longer, more are approaching the upper limit of the life span. Apparently, this has not been due to genetic changes but rather to better nutrition, the conquest of certain diseases, especially infectious diseases and improved living conditions generally. Combined with continued high birth rate, particularly in the developing countries, more people living longer has resulted in areas of over population and areas where the local resources as developed are unable to support the growing population.

Would the extension of the absolute life span create an even more massive population problem? What impact would this have on the birth of more humans? Some see the danger of selfishness being promoted on a scale heretofore not seen. After all, if a population were enjoying the good life and could do so almost indefinitely, would there not be a great pressure to keep a zero population growth, or even a negative one, since the earth's energy and irreplaceable material resources would be constantly and irreversibly dwindling? The earth would become a huge lifeboat with no room for extra passengers. Think also of the joy, and the problems, associated with having concurrently living 5, 6 or 7 generations of the same family. Would there be room at the top? Promotions and advancements would become even more highly competitive. Some of these problems are considered by Rosenfeld but all of us must deeply ponder them before accepting wholeheartedly the "blessings" of an increase in absolute human life span.

There is clearly an advantage if it were possible to get old and die without the disabling ravages so frequently associated with advanced years. I recall the remark of a venerable physician, psychiatrist and philosopher, who at the age of 85, turned to me in some exasperation when he could not recall his secretary's intercom number: "Its a shame to see such a fine mind going to pot!! From this perspective, to discover and correct the pathophysiological process which leads to personality deterioration so that a person would enjoy physical and mental health until the hour of death would be a real benefit. However, to start manipulating the genetic program which is the result of God's wisdom acting through millions of years of evolutionary development would require very careful and complete study to ascertain that our purposeful modification of the human genetic program is truly in keeping with the Divine Will.

Father Albert Morazewski was recently in California where he made several presentations: In Anaheim, the Sisters of Mercy of the Province of Omaha, who sponsor fourteen hospitals and five nursing homes, conducted a Medical Moral Seminar for Bishops of the Dioceses in which one or other of their health institutions are located, and for members of the boards of directors, physicians, administrators and staff of these institutions. Father Albert responded to a paper by Dr. Albert Jonsen on the "The Right to Die." Some of Father Albert's remarks are reflected on the first page of this issue of Ethics and Medics.