

Old Age in 18th-Century British Health Regimens

What should we eat, and how should we live in order to ensure a long and fulfilling life? These questions have been central to every society, from early civilizations to the present day. Each society has provided its own answers, and this paper focuses on how these questions were addressed in health regimens published in eighteenth-century Britain. To provide a comprehensive insight, this study engages with the concept of the six non-naturals, which were believed to be fundamental to human health: climate (air), food and drink, evacuation and repletion, sleep and wakefulness, movement and rest, and the passions of the mind, as outlined by antique physician Galen.¹ Although medical theory evolved and the majority of regimens no longer strictly followed humoral medicine, they continued to postulate the six non-naturals as the cornerstone of health regimens. Among these, diet held a particularly prominent place and was often equated with health itself due to its centrality in Galenic physiology.² These regimens demonstrate the belief that individuals could live to a very old age if they were willing to adhere to a prescribed regimen.

1 Niebyl, P. H.: "The Non-Naturals". *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 45, 1971, 5, 486–492.

2 Schäfer, Daniel: *Old Age and Disease in Early Modern Medicine*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2016, 26–27. John Arbuthnot asserted, "all the intentions, pursued by medicines, may be obtained and enforced by diet." (Arbuthnot, John: *An essay concerning the nature of aliments, and the choice of them, according to the different constitutions of human bodies. In which the different effects, advantages, and disadvantages of animal and vegetable diet, are explain'd*. Dublin, 1731, 145). George Cheyne gave two general recommendations: The Aged should (1) carefully guard against all the Injuries of the Weather; and (2) lessen the Quantity, and lower the Quality of their Food gradually, as they grow older; even before a manifest Decay of Appetite force them to it (Cheyne, George: *An essay of health and long life*. London, 1724, 229). See also Mead, quoted via Sinclair, John: *The code of health and longevity; or, a concise view of the principles calculated for the preservation of health, and the attainment of long life*. Vol. 3. Edinburgh, 1807, 484.

The definition of old age, however, was far from uniform.³ Old age was never defined solely by the passing of a certain birthday; rather, it was shaped by functional, cultural, as well as chronological criteria. Most reflections on aging began with the premise that human beings possess limited bodily resources that must be carefully managed and preserved. Achieving this, required individuals to develop self-awareness of their own bodies, a skill closely linked to self-governance and the suppression of inappropriate desires. Nevertheless, certain general observations were widely shared: the old man was commonly perceived as either cold and moist or cold and dry.⁴ To sustain life, it was considered essential to counteract the dryness and coldness associated with aging and to restore humoral balance. Consequently, identifying ways to warm and moisten the body became the chief aim of geriatric advice. There were no regimen books specifically devoted to aging women, although advice concerning them was scattered across various works. It was generally accepted that female “grows old sooner than the Male,”⁵ but old age was mostly seen as asexual, a view that can be observed in George Cheyne’s one-sex model.⁶

In the premodern period, morality and medicine were closely intertwined, forming a shared field united by the principle of moderation, which was widely recommended as the most effective means of maintaining bodily balance. Two guiding principles from this era—etched into the Temple of Apollo at Delphi—resonated deeply with premodern readers and shaped ideals: “Know thyself” and “Nothing in excess.”⁷ As John Theobald quoted Dr. Barrow in *Every Man His Own Physician*: “We can never set upon it too soon, we should never think it too late to begin; to live well is always

3 The most important studies of this field are Schäfer, *Old Age and Disease in Early Modern Medicine*; Yallop, Helen: *Age and Identity in Eighteenth-Century England*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2013; Ottaway, Susan R.: *The Decline of Life Old Age in Eighteenth-Century England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004; Roberts, Marie Mulvey: A Physic Against Death: Eternal Life and the Enlightenment – Gerontology and Gender. In: *Literature and Medicine during the Eighteenth Century* (Roberts, Marie Mulvey, Porter, Roy, eds.). London: Routledge, 1993, 151–167.

4 Schäfer, *Old Age and Disease in Early Modern Medicine*, 24–25.

5 Lynch, Bernard: *Guide to Health through the Various Stages of Life*. London, 1754, 8.

6 Yallop, Helen: “Representing Aged Masculinity in Eighteenth-Century England”. *Cultural and Social History*, 10, 2013, 2, 191–210, 201.

7 “Considering the great damage that comes upon most people daily by not knowing or not regarding there own Constitutions of body, whereby they neglect the pretious Jewel of Health.” Archer, John: *Every man his own doctor in two parts*. London, 1671, Preface (unpaginated).

the best thing we can do (...); it is most seasonable for young Men, it is most necessary for old, it is most advisable for all.”⁸

Regimen

To understand the popularity of regimens’ during the early modern period, it is essential to recognise the prevailing notion that prevention was preferable to cure. This distinction underpinned the divide between regimen and medicine. Premodern authors frequently stated that: “Since no Man therefore can have a better Physician than himself, nor a more sovereign Antidote than a Regimen.”¹⁰ Knowing how to conduct life was considered crucial and those who disregarded regimens could not hope to live long, which emphasised personal responsibility for one’s health. Nevertheless, even strict adherence to these rules did not always guarantee a long and happy life.¹¹

Regimens blended medical advice with traditional maxims, folkloric remedies, and moral guidance.¹² Analogies and proverbs were frequently employed as effective tools to convey and impart knowledge. This compilation of advice is evident in texts such as *The nurse’s guide: or, the right method of bringing up young children. To which is added, an essay on preserving health, and prolonging life. With a treatise of the gout*.¹³ There are three

8 Theobald, John: *Every man his own physician. Being a complete collection of ... remedies, for every disease incident to the human body. With plain instructions for their common use*. London, 1764, 141–142.

9 For general introduction see: Fissell, Mary E.: Readers, Texts, and Contexts: Vernacular Medical Works in Early Modern England. In: *The Popularization of Medicine, 1650-1850* (Porter, Roy, ed.). London: Routledge, 1992, 72–96. Furdell, Elizabeth Lane: *Publishing and medicine in early modern England*. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2002.

10 Mead, Richard: *Medicina flagellata; or, The doctor scarify’d*. London, 1721.

11 “This accounts for some Things we can’t tell what to make of in the Providence of God, about the Health and Life of some Persons; that some weak Persons should live a long while, when others of a more healthy Constitution are cut off; that some pious, useful, an excellent Persons are so sickly, and (as we think) immaturely taken away, while some of a very different Character are healthy, and attain a great, though not a good Old Age.” (Theobald, *Every man his own physician*, 97–98).

12 Sometimes they were written in verse: Armstrong, John: *The art of preserving health*, London, 1757; Baynard, Edward: *Health, a poem. Shewing how to procure, preserve, and restore it*. London, 1719.

13 Anonymous: *The nurse’s guide: or, the right method of bringing up young children. To which is added, an essay on preserving health, and prolonging life. With a treatise of the gout*. London, 1729.

different works within a single volume, each addressing a different group of readers but united by a similar underlying idea.

From the sixteenth century onward, medical authors increasingly made their regimens and health guides accessible by writing in the vernacular.¹⁴ For example, dietary advice was much more generalised, often summed up in a few rules, as opposed to earlier regimens such as Gabriele Zerbi's *Gerontocomia*. As a result, late seventeenth-century and eighteenth-century regimens were significantly shorter, and their advice became less complex. Regimens were often reprinted over several decades, as evidenced by the examples used as sources for this study. They were written for practicing rather than reading and were seen by the public as a dialogue between those who possessed knowledge and those who sought to apply it. The genre was not confined to a specialist readership, as its rules were intended to be adopted by everyone. During this period, some translations of works originally published on the continent (Leonardus Lesius, Luigi Cornaro) were also published. Translations and reprinting of older works were common, which shows that the content was passing between different cultures.

Illness

While regimens primarily focused on prevention rather than cure, authors nevertheless reflected on the illnesses that accompanied old age. Authors did not typically offer advice on curing illness, but stated that most old men were subject to chronic diseases, “which seized them in their Youth, or declining Age,” as Floyer wrote, and continued: “By a proper Regimen we prevent their Increase; but their Cure belong to Physick.”¹⁵ Here, Floyer drew a clear distinction between the two fields and their respective approaches. It was widely accepted that “old men die merely by being old, and Old age cannot be cured,”¹⁶ as, “old age was inevitable.” Hill stated

14 For example, John Trusler wrote 15 rules at the beginning of the book in Latin. Trusler, John: *An easy way to prolong life, by a little attention to what we eat and drink: containing, a chemical analysis, or, an enquiry into the nature and properties, of all kinds of food; how far they are wholesome, and agree with different constitutions*. London, 1773.

15 Floyer, John: *Medicina Gerocomica: or The Galenic Art of Preserving Old Mens Healths*. London, 1725, 24–25.

16 Hill, John: *Virtues of Sage in Lengthening Human Life*. London, 1770, 9.

that, “men must expect a decay of strength: and it would be as idle so call it a disease, as it were vain to think of remedies.”¹⁷ Old age was often described metaphorically as a kind of disease, as stated by the author of *Synopsis medicinae*, “Old Age itself is a Disease or rather a Legion of them.”¹⁸ Certain illnesses were especially associated with old age, such as gout, which was the result of intemperate living,¹⁹ haemorrhoids,²⁰ memory,²¹ and repletion, as elderly “can more expeditiously diminish than increase the juices of the body.”²² Elderly women were considered particularly susceptible to phlegmatic conditions and uterine complaints.²³

Writers offered general advice on how to cope with illness, rooted in the principles of temperance and timely intervention. Hill recommended that “purging²⁴ will be cured by proper diet, when it is regarded early: otherwise medicines must be called in.”²⁵ Medicine was considered a last resort, as old age required exemption from “strong physic”,²⁶ or too much sweating,²⁷ because “After fifty Years of Age, we must be more cautious and moderate both as to the frequency of Bleeding, (...) which from that Age to extreme old Age are daily decaying both in Quantity and Quality.”²⁸ Hill therefore advocated: “Avoid medicine if possible (...) the best guard of their health is

17 Hill, John: *The Old Man's Guide to Health and Longer Life*. London, 1750, 45.

18 Allen, John: *Synopsis medicinae; or a summary view of the whole practice of physick*. London, 1756, 97.

19 Oliver, William: *A practical essay on the use and abuse of warm bathing in gouty cases*. London, 1751, 8.

20 Carr, Richard: *Medicinal epistles upon several occasions*. London, 1714, 94.

21 Strother, Edward: *An essay on sickness and health; wherein are contain'd, all necessary cautions and directions, for the regulation of diseases'd and heal thy persons: in which Dr. Cheyne's mistaken opinions in his late essay, are occasionally taken notice of*. London, 1725, 167.

22 Mead, quoted in Sinclair, *The Code of health and longevity*, 483.

23 Strother, *An essay on sickness and health*, 281.

24 Hill, *The Old Man's Guide*, 27: “No disease is more mischievous to weak old persons than a purging.”

25 Ibid. 42. “Children and old Men bear fasting very ill, it weakens their Spirits, abates their Heat, dries their Bodies, hinders their Sleep, binds their Bodies therefore all thin old Men ought to eat little.” (Floyer, *Medicina Gerocomica*, 13).

26 Radcliffe, John: *Dr. Radcliffe's practical dispensatory: Containing a complete body of prescriptions, ... selected I. From various authors. II. From the best prescriptions chiefly used / by Dr. Radcliffe, ... By Edward Strother, M.D.* London, 1730, 44, 108.

27 Anonymous, *The nurse's guide*, 114.

28 Flamant, M.: *The art of preserving and restoring health explaining the nature and causes of the distempers that afflict mankind: also shewing that every man is, or may be his own best physician*. London, 1697, 37.

quietness”.²⁹ Even “though old age in many be a disease not curable, but by death; yet these are but accidental,” wrote the author of *The divine physician*: “life itself is a blessing; and the longer we live, the more experience we have of God’s favour.”³⁰

Six Non-Naturals

Focusing on six non-naturals, we begin with **air**, about which authors of regimens wrote the least. Although Galen listed air in first place among his six non-naturals, we cannot find detailed advice in regimens regarding what good air means.³¹ Rules concerning air were expressed in very general terms: “Nothing contributes more to health and long life than pure and good air,”³² or as John Archer stated “Air is the most worthy Element for the preservation of Life in every creature.”³³ For George Cheyne, the primary recommendation was to “avoid the Injuries of the Weather, as much as ever they can. The Blood of the Aged is ever most certainly poor and viscid. I advise such, to keep Home, provide warm Rooms and Beds, and good Fires, whenever the Sky lowes, Winds blow, or the Air is sharp.”³⁴ John Arbuthnot provided the most detailed contemporary analysis of air in his *Essay Concerning the Effects of Air on Human Bodies*, although the work did not focus exclusively on old age. He wrote that the best mark of the wholesomeness of the air is the customary longevity of the inhabitants, an observation echoed by Mackenzie several years later.³⁵ Air should not be cold or damp, since “Cold air chills the blood; and in old men we want rather to warm it,” and Hill noted that north and north-east winds are

29 Hill, *The Old Man’s Guide*, 36.

30 Harris, John: *The divine physician, prescribing rules for the prevention, and cure of most diseases, as well of the body, as the soul*. London, 1676, 5.

31 For example: “The Air that is good for old People, ought to be temperate” (Anonymous, *The nurse’s guide*, 87).

32 Hill, *The Old Man’s Guide*, 16.

33 Archer, *Every man his own doctor*, 14.

34 Cheyne, *An essay of health and long life*, 11, 205.

35 Mackenzie, James: *The History of Health, and the Art of Preserving it: Or, An Account of All that Has Been Recommended by Physicians and Philosophers, Towards the Preservation of Health*. Edinburgh, 1758, 368. Authors also wrote about Unwholesome Air: Steele, Richard: *A discourse concerning old-age, tending to the instruction, caution and comfort of aged persons*. London, 1688, 24–25.

the worst for old men. Older people were advised to avoid being outdoors in the early morning or late evening.³⁶ Another recommendation was to avoid “smoaky Coffee-Houss when a clear Air and Sun shine invite you into the Fields The Blood grown heavy by Inactivity should be stirred up: by Exercises in the open Air.”³⁷

With regard to **sleep**, it was believed that the elderly need longer hours than the young “because it lessens the dryness of their constitution”³⁸ and makes the pulse lower.³⁹ John Hill noted: “Six hours is as long as a person in the prime of life should sleep; but, in age, eight, or even ten, according to the peculiar constitution, may be more proper.”⁴⁰ Mackenzie, however, warned against excessive sleep, which “renders the body phlegmatic and inactive, impairs the memory, and stupefies the understanding. And excessive wakefulness dissipates the strength, produces fevers, dries and wastes the body, and anticipates old age.”⁴¹ Regimens also addressed the timing, duration, and conditions of sleep. It was important to sleep at the right hours, in a salubrious environment, and in a suitable position.⁴² It was suggested that the elderly should warm their bed.⁴³ While daytime sleep was discouraged for the young, it was considered permissible for the elderly, provided that they “take it rather sitting than lying down, because the head will be less offended with the rising vapours.”⁴⁴ As a general rule, both

36 Hill, *The Old Man's Guide*, 18, 20. *Ibid.*, 29.

37 Carr, *Medicinal epistles*, 29–30.

38 Trusler, *An easy way to prolong life*, 13–14. But as it is written in Hill, *The Old Man's Guide*, 29, there should not be any additional lying in the bed (*Ibid.*, 31).

39 Floyer, *Medicina Gerocomica*, 16–17.

40 Hill, *The Old Man's Guide*, 34. Also Mackenzie, *The History of Health*, 383; Hill, *Virtues of Sage*, 32.

41 Mackenzie, *History of health*, 383–384.

42 Trusler, *An easy way to prolong life*, 9: “... proper Time of going to Sleep, the right Way of lying in Bed, the true Manner of being cover'd in it, and the fit Time of waking and riling.” Also: “Going into Bed, they ought first to lie on their left Side, that their Food may descend to the Bottom of the Stomach, which inclines that Way.” (Anonymous, *The nurse's guide*, 115, 117).

43 Trusler (*An easy way to prolong life*, 14/5) reports of older who constantly sit near fire, heath their beds, wearing warm clothes. There were also different opinions: “Sit not dole to the Fire, even in cold Weather, presently after Dinner: For it raises Fumes, and hinders Digestion: A cool Air will strike the Heat inward, to help the new Access.” (Byfield, Timothy: *Directions tending to health and long life*. London, 1717, 12).

44 Trusler, *An easy way to prolong life*, 10.

excessive wakefulness and excessive sleep were deemed harmful and were sometimes considered akin to disease.⁴⁵

Management of **emotions** and **passions** was considered of the utmost importance for good health.⁴⁶ “Nothing, in a man’s life”, wrote John Trusler, “tends more to health and longevity, than peace of mind; it is the index to old age.”⁴⁷ Emotions were understood not only as psychological phenomena but also as physiological processes, reflecting a psychosomatic and holistic understanding of the body. Emotional regulation was not considered solely within the domain of moral philosophy, as John Hill remarked: “WITHOUT entering into the province of the moralist or preacher, we may affirm here, that the passions demand great regard in preserving the health of old men. The motion of the blood in circulation is greatly affected and altered by them”, and advised them to avoid the hurry of the spirits at any age.⁴⁸ For this reason, Hill also suggested seeking assistance beyond strictly medical practitioners:

*Let him examine himself, whether it be a disorder of his mind; and then his physician, whether it lie in the body. In the first case the remedy is philosophy: But in the latter, a few medicines will restore him to temper; to that temper on which his life and happiness depend. LET the hasty old man cool himself by physic and a low diet; and let him who is melancholy and gloomy, banish the everlasting fear of death by warmer foods, cordial medicines, and that best of cordials, wine.*⁴⁹

45 Carr, *Medicinal epistles*, 164–165.

46 Cheyne, *An Essay of Health*, 144. For a more in-depth discussion of the history of emotions in the early modern period, see f.e. Broomhall, Susan (ed.): *Early Modern Emotions: An Introduction*. London: Routledge, 2016 and Stolberg, Michael: “Emotions and the Body in Early Modern Medicine”. *Emotion Review*, 11, 2019, 2, 113–122.

47 Trusler, John: *A Sure Way to Strengthen Life with Vigour; Particularly in Old Age*, London, 1770, 167. Quotation from Yallop, “Representing Aged Masculinity”, 196.

48 Hill, *The Old Man’s Guide*, 24, 27.

49 *Ibid.*, 27. Hill described sage as: “Helpfull, as it can calm both also raise passions. O cheer, and raise, and elevate the spirits: for this keeps up their motion, and expands the substance of the brain, preventing that contraction which we fear” (Hill, *The Virtues of Sage*, 11). “That it continues health, preserves the faculties, and memory, and by a grateful warmth cheers, revives, refreshes, and recruits. preventing coldness, flatulencies, and indigestions there, and giving constantly a moderate, never a voracious appetite; curing also numbness! deafness, dimness of sight, and dullness of apprehension.” (*Ibid.*, 12).

Since food was believed to influence emotions, dietary regimens were also proposed as a means of mitigating passions, reflecting the interconnected nature of bodily and emotional states. This perspective was also endorsed by moral authors.⁵⁰ John Floyer in *Medicina Gerocomica* warned that: “cold Air, cold Baths, cold Diet ... cold Cloaths, cold Beds”, might have exactly the same result as the “cooling Passions of Fear and Sadness” (...), since “Immoderate Cares and Passions, especially Sorrow, hasten old Age”. Positive emotions, however, were understood as life-extending: “Envy, Ambition, Covetousness, Anger, do decay the Body; but Hope, Love, Joy, are Prolongers of our Lives by their Influence on the Humours.”⁵¹

Among the positive emotions, cheerfulness held a particularly esteemed position. In his *Old Man's Guide*, John Hill defined cheerfulness as “the natural offspring of health”.⁵² As Hellen Yallop observed,⁵³ within medical advice, the word cheerful functioned as a stamp of approval for habits, pursuits and behaviours characterized by moderation and sociability: “The company of agreeable friends will be the best medicine in an evening; and good broth his fittest supper. – mixing advice from different fields.”⁵⁴ This illustrates the interconnectedness of different forms of advice: what one ate was important, but so was the company in which one ate.

In suggesting that the “old man” should be “always cheerful but never merry”, Hill recommended an hour or two of conversation with family or neighbours before sleep.⁵⁵ Here, the distinction between temperate cheerfulness and intemperate joy becomes apparent, the latter being considered

50 “Moderate Fasting is a most excellent Physician both for the Body and Mind.” (Tryon, Thomas: *Wisdom's dictates, or, Aphorisms & rules, physical, moral, and divine, for preserving the health of the body, and the peace of the mind*. London, 1691, 5).

51 Floyer, *Medicina Gerocomica*. He also proposed: “IT is necessary to conquer the vitious Passions which attend old Age” (*Ibid.*, 20–21). For effect of lethargie in old see Arbuthnot, John: *An essay concerning the nature of aliments, and the choice of them, according to the different constitutions of human bodies. In which the different effects, advantages, and disadvantages of animal and vegetable diet, are explain'd*, Dublin, 1731, 86.

52 Hill, *The Old Man's Guide*, 4.

53 Yallop, *Age and Identity in Eighteenth-Century England*, ch. “Society and Sociability: Cheerfulness,” 83–106.

54 Hill, *The Old Man's Guide*, 46.

55 *Ibid.*, 33. “GOOD humour, and a happy satisfaction of mind, will give the aged many years, and much happiness in them.” (*Ibid.*, 25).

harmful to older bodies because it could excessively accelerate bodily processes. Cheyne stated that nothing will more effectively contribute towards the “Felicity of a Green Old Age”, “than innocent and entertaining Amusements, engaging and light Studies, and rational Diversions in cheerful and affectionate Society.”⁵⁶ It was especially important for old men to mix with young company.⁵⁷ As Hannah Newton wrote: “Cheerfulness was not just a sign of recovery: it was also the means by which the weak body was restored to full strength.”⁵⁸ In contrast to some of the other aspects of convalescent care, cheerfulness was beneficial in all bodily states,⁵⁹ and was compared to high spirit⁶⁰: “for this cause Physicians frequently advise their Patients to nourish that Affection in them, and to avoid the contrary, (namely) Sorrow and Sadness; which last being cold and dry, and so hindering the circulation of the Blood, debilitating the Animal, and Natural.”⁶¹

As Hill wrote, violent passions and intemperance “disturb and hurt the brain and bring premature old age.”⁶² This reinforces the importance of temperance and moderation. “Perhaps the wise and good live long because they are temperate. CHEARFULNESS promotes longlife; and this springs best of all from the same source; for what is so chearful as innocence?”⁶³ Hill asked himself and showed how longevity, physical health and emotions were tightly connected. The elderly were advised to live as innocently as possible—not ascetically, as a preparation for death, but temperately, avoiding tumult and excess. Next quotation shows the dangers of passions:

56 Yallop, “Representing Aged Masculinity”, 198.

57 *Ibid.*, 199.

58 Newton, Hannah: *Misery to Mirth. Recovery from Illness in Early Modern England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, 84.

59 Carr, *Medicinal epistles*, 47–48: “... chearful Mind; for that easy Temper, which’ Innocently gives into any Humours, and always accompanies Honesty and good Manners, is not only very conducive to a good State of Health, but likewise promises a happy old Age.”

60 Newton, *Misery and Mirth*, 86, 84.

61 Harris, *The divine physician*, Foreword, unpaginated.

62 Hill, *The Virtues of Sage*, 10. See also Newton (*Misery and Mirth*, 58) who shows that cheerful passions were also needed for patients.

63 Hill, *The Virtues of Sage*, 30. “We can get chearful with food we eat.” (*Ibid.*, 32).

*THE Passions alter the Circulation. In Anger, Hatred, Envy, the Pulse is great and vehement. In Joy, great, rare, flow. In Sadness the Pulse is rare and flow and languid. Fear and Despondency make the Pulse inordinate, unequal. Immoderate Passions make the Pulse languid. Studies spend the Animal Spirits; in Melancholics the Pulse is obscure, contracted, inconstant, unequal, deficient, flow, rare; Modesty and Shame stop the Circulation, as appears by the Flushing in the Face. Immoderate Cares and Passions, especially Sorrow, hasten old Age. Envy, Ambition, Covetousness, Anger, do decay the Body; but Hope, Love, Joy, are Prolongers of our Lives by their Influence on the Humours.*⁶⁴

Yet even joy, when excessive, was considered potentially harmful, as: “it hurries the circulation vehemently, and irregularly; it exhausts the spirits; and has occasioned sudden death. It is a violence of youth; it belongs to that period of life; that can bear it; and to that let us leave it. Let the old man be as the Quakers in this point; always cheerful but never merry.”⁶⁵ As Yallop remarked, unlike joy, cheerfulness was never vehement or harmful. It was benign and moderate, while excessive joy could overflow uncontrollably.⁶⁶

Moderation and temperance were habits best instilled from youth. As Mackenzie observed, these virtues could sustain a healthy old age.⁶⁷ Bernard Lynch argued: “that the Harmony and Union of our Principles, which are called Temperament, be well Supported, that the Spirits which are dissipated every Moment be repair’d, and the Excrements retain’d in the Body be expell’d. All this may be easily obtain’d by the means of a good Regimen, without the Assistance of any Medicine.”⁶⁸ Thus, temperance and emotional balance were seen not merely as health practices, but as guiding principles for a harmonious and fulfilling life.

64 Floyer, *Medicina Gerocomica*, 20–21.

65 Hill, *The Old Man’s Guide*, 24. “We know madness is a disease; and violent passion is a temporary madness.” (*Ibid.*, 26).

66 Yallop, *Age and Identity in Eighteenth-Century England*, 80.

67 Mackenzie, *The History of Health*, 411. Also: “Temperance is of infinite Benefit to Mankind.” (Mead, *Medicina flagellate*, 143).

68 Lynch, *Guide to Health*, 60. “In fine, let a Man’s Life be longer or shorter, yet Sobriety and Temperance renders it pleasant and delightful” (Mead, *Medicina flagellata*, 132).

Ease and good humour were considered key ingredients of a happy life and long life.⁶⁹ Older people were seen as needing to accept that some activities are no longer possible. A manual for women *The Female Aegis*, explains that: “Age has its privileges and its honours. It claims exemption from the more arduous offices of society, to which its strength is no longer equal . . . Deprived of many active pleasures, it claims an equivalent of ease and repose.”⁷⁰ And as *The nurse’s guide* stated:

*But above all, aged People ought to take particular Care not to be excited to Passion, for fear of falling into an Apoplexy; they had better, look upon those that use them ill, as unreasonable People, that are beneath their Anger. They should hope to live as long as Nestor and never think of Death, for fear of anticipating it by so doing, and grieving themselves at the Approach of what they will not perceive, for this is hurtful to all the Senses; for an insuperable Evil there is no Help but Oblivion. But yet old People ought not to live like Epicures, without Hopes of another Life, but should endeavour by their virtuous Actions, to acquire an immortal Glory.*⁷¹

Among the six non-naturals, older men (advice was rarely formulated for women) were advised to avoid a foolish fondness for women and for **sexual life**,⁷² which was considered more dangerous than complete abstinence, as Flamant stated:

for the Ebullition of the Blood ending sooner or later with Age, the Passions are extinguish’d with it, and the Calm we enjoy after the Storm, makes us soon forget all the Pain we suffer’d to resist it: whereas the Inconveniencies that remain after the immoderate use of those Pleasures, such as the trembling of the Nerves, Palsie, Shortness of Breath, Phthisis, Gout, &c. make us pay very dear, in a long and

69 Hill, *The Old Man’s Guide*, 28.

70 *The Female Aegis; Or, the Duties of a Woman from Childhood to Old Age*. London, 1798, 171. Quoted from: Ottaway, *The Decline of Life*, 28.

71 Anonymous, *The nurse’s guide*, 132.

72 Hill, *The Old Man’s Guide*, 25.

*infirm Old Age, for the transitory Charms we enjoy'd, and the frivolous Amusements of our Youth.*⁷³

Venereal pleasures were considered harmful to men of all ages, as they were believed to “consume that fat and unctuous Part of the Blood, which is necessary to repair the radical Moisture of which there is never too much.”⁷⁴ Frequent indulgence in these pleasures was believed to have deleterious effects, including: “makes the Hair fall, obscures the Lustre of the Eyes, and changes the florid, lively Colour of the Face and Lips, by extinguishing that Heat, and dissipating those Spirits which animated and cherish’d those Parts.”⁷⁵ Premature concubinage was believed to hasten old age, as Mackenzie wrote.⁷⁶ Certain foods were even recommended as a means of tempering sexual passions in the elderly. One author suggested that “Lettice, may be of Use to make old People deep, and to defend them against the Attacks of Venus, if they are not already exempted from them by their Age.”⁷⁷ However, even in this context, complete abstinence was not universally encouraged. The balance between indulgence and restraint was a recurring theme in advice regarding sexual passions, as with other aspects of the non-naturals.

Diet was among the most important topics addressed in health regimens. Age-specific diets have a long history, dating back to the recommendations of Hippocrates and Galen, who tailored dietary prescriptions to the differing humoral compositions of various age groups. Food was regarded as one of the most critical factors influencing aging, as exemplified by Luigi Cornaro’s *Regimen Discourses on the sober life*. The primary emphasis was placed on controlling one’s appetite and avoiding sudden changes in diet, since “all sudden alterations are dangerous.”⁷⁸ As Hill wrote, many causes of ill health existed, “but the principal one is the variety and excess of

73 Flamant, *The art of preserving and restoring health*, 20–21.

74 Anonymous, *The nurse’s guide*, 124. Similar also on *Ibid.*, 126. Old man should “abstain from the Use of these Pleasures, that they may not consume and destroy that Oily Part of the Blood, which is necessary to recruit their radical Moisture, as well as to support and preserve Life.” (*Ibid.*, 126).

75 *Ibid.*, 126. Too much sex could also “weaken the Memory, especially in old Men.” (Allen, *Synopsis medicinae*, 208).

76 Mackenzie, *The History of Health*, 388.

77 *Ibid.*

78 Hill, *The Old Man’s Guide*, 8.

food.”⁷⁹ The elderly were advised to eat less and to consume lighter foods in order to accommodate the weakened digestive capacity of the stomach.⁸⁰ “By a temperate, sober Diet, I mean, neither eating nor drinking more at a time 5 nor oftener, than the Constitution of the Body allows,”⁸¹ wrote Timothy Byfield. The author of *Medicina flagellata* stated: “A sober Diet makes a Man die without Pain; it maintains the Senes in Vigour; it mitigates the Violence of Passions and Affections. It preserves the Memory; it helps the Understanding; it allays the Heat of Lust; it brings a Man to that weighty Confederation of his latter End.”⁸²

A simple diet was generally recommended, with particular emphasis on avoiding the mixing of different foods: “The next thing to be considered is, a maxim generally laid down by all authors on this subject; namely, that simplicity of food is more conducive to health than a variety: but experience teaches us the contrary.”⁸³ “There is not a greater error in an old person,” wrote Hill: “than to eat of many dishes at one meal. (...) A regularity of eating is the next care to the selecting proper food; and fixing on a right quantity.”⁸⁴ Once again, the emphasis lay on moderation, which did not imply abstinence or starvation:

They were in the right who declared the mischief of heavy suppers; but the poets have long since told us what sort of people those are, who, in avoiding a fault, rush into its contrary. There is a medium sure between a heavy supper, and emptiness; and that is best. Let the old man

79 *Ibid.*, 5.

80 Hill, *The Old Man's Guide*, 9–10: “No aged person should eat more than one considerable meal of solid food in the day”; Mead, *Medicina flagellata*, 137. “Eating less, abstaining and Strong food should be omitted in the morning.” Hill, *The Old Man's Guide*, 35, 42; Floyer, *Medicina Gerocomica*, 16: “stomach ought never to be overloaded.” Similar advice Anonymous, *The nurse's guide*, 107: “But they that are full of Blood, ought to eat a hearty Dinner, and not sup at all, whereas they that are lean and wafted, ought to dine moderately. and eat a plentiful Supper.” Trusler, *An easy way to prolong life*, 6, 45, 72.

81 Byfield, *Directions tending to health and long life*, 4.

82 Mead, *Medicina flagellate*, 172–173.

83 Trusler, *An easy way to prolong life*, 34. Similar Hill, *The Old Man's Guide to Health*, 16, 36–37: “THE rule is to eat only innocent, tho' the most nourishing things, and these only in moderate quantities.” See also Anonymous, *The nurse's guide*, 88.

84 Similar Hill, *The Old Man's Guide to Health*, 14–16.

*eat liquids; and of all liquid diets, those which are partly composed of milk are best for him.*⁸⁵

Easily digestible meat, such as cock, hen, capon, or turkey, were considered suitable for the elderly;⁸⁶ “Weak broths, of veal, chicken, or mutton, may be eat occasionally; and jellies honestly made at home, are proper, safe, and wholesome. THESE things will answer the two purposes of nourishing and moistening: for aged persons are naturally too dry.”⁸⁷ Here, too, disagreements emerged: some authors recommended meat from younger animals,⁸⁸ while others believed older animals were preferable because their flesh was less viscous.⁸⁹ Fish, understood as colder and moister than meat, was generally discouraged for the elderly.⁹⁰ Cold and viscous foods were to be avoided or consumed only in small quantities as “Flower Meats, Cheese, Roots, Herbs, Pork, breed a viscid Nutriment; but Wine heats and promotes the Secretion in old Men.”⁹¹ Practical dietary recommendations also included the use of hot flavours for those with a low pulse and the consumption of well-fermented, well-baked bread. It was noted that “very old men live much on milk, small ale, sack, eggs, and broths.”⁹²

Diet was closely connected with drink. “Was man to live the life of a savage, water would be a sufficient drink; as eating only a small quantity, and using great exercise, his digestive organs would be much stronger, and sufficient for digestion without any other assistance: but according to his present method of living, eating daily too much, and taking little exercise,

85 *Ibid.*, 10.

86 *Ibid.*, 62–63.

87 *Ibid.*, 9–11. “LET his breakfast be a yolk of an egg, beaten up with half a pint of asses milk, and a quarter of an ounce of conserve of roses; and his supper veal broth nearly boiled to a jelly.” (*Ibid.*, 37).

88 Anonymous: *The nurse’s guide*, 89: “Pork and Beef are hurtful to them, if they don’t commonly use a great deal of Exercise. Lamb, which is full of a viscous Juice, is prejudicial; but Veal and Mutton are wholesome for them”. “Old People may sometimes make use of Fish and fait Meat, to loosen and carry away that viscous Phelgm that flicks to the inside of their Guts, and to remove Obstructions; but then they must return again in a little Time to their usual Diet, which ought to be altogether moistening.” (*Ibid.*, 105).

89 Trusler, *An easy way to prolong life*, 42.

90 *Ibid.* – for promoting fish see Hill, *The Old Man’s Guide to Health*, 9–10.

91 Floyer, *Medicina Gerocomico*, 13. Also Hill, *The Old Man’s Guide to Health*, 47.

92 Floyer, *Medicina Gerocomico*, 12.

he requires wine. However, the wine should be diluted with water.”⁹³ Even though water—if clean and without odour—was regarded as the best drink.⁹⁴ The authors focused predominantly on wine, which was understood as warming and comforting. Wine was also necessary for normal functioning of the body. *The nurse’s guide* warned that no wine was considered wholesome in itself, nor could it replace a regular diet, and added that it should be taken moderately.⁹⁵ Neither sweet nor overly sharp wines were recommended; instead, wines with “quickness and poignancy” were preferred.⁹⁶ Red wine was often recommended because it was believed to warm the body and exert a diuretic effect. Strong drinks, like liquors, were also used for heating the body.⁹⁷

Another drink that was highly recommended was milk: “Goat’s milk or donkey’s milk, which should only briefly be exposed to air, is better, but the best is milk sucked directly from a human female’s breast,”⁹⁸ as: “for every Thing living is nourished by the same Kind of Matter, from which it was first form’d.”⁹⁹ Milk was considered particularly suitable for the elderly due to their weakened digestive faculties, and popular preparations

93 Trusler, *An easy way to prolong life*, 54. “Water then, is the necessary drink, but it is much helped by brewing; that is, wine, beer, &c. if moderately taken, as we have mentioned, is the best liquor we can use.” (*Ibid.*, 54–55).

94 For gout see Smith, John: *The curiosities of common water, or, the advantages thereof in preventing and curing distempers: gather’d from the writings of several eminent physicians, and also from more than forty years experience*, London, 1724, 29. “Sack is the best” wrote Thomas Short: *Discourses on tea, sugar, milk, made-wines, spirits, punch, tobacco, &c: with plain and useful rules for gouty people*. London, 1750.

95 Anonymous, *The nurse’s guide*, 108.

96 *Ibid.*

97 Strother, Edward: *The family companion for health, or, the housekeeper’s physician: containing a description of all the diseases incident to the human body*. London, 1729, 28. – “In this Case all spirituous Liquors (drank in Moderation) are proper, and every thing that may quicken the Fermentation in the Stomach; for this is a slackness of Motion, as the former is a quickness; therefore riding, and all Brisk Exercises of the Body, are proper in this Case, as they are hurtful in the former; and as the other is from the Force of Eagerness and Rashness in Youth, this the Effect of Heaviness in Old Age; and although this sort of Consumption is not of so sharp a Nature, yet it is much harder to cure; notwithstanding the Patient may be very much reliev’d by expectorating Medicines”; Burdon, Henry: *The fountain of health*. London, 1734, 42; “When the Stomach is jaded and weakened by a Surfeit of tenacious Food the preceding Day, which have left much Phlegm in the excretory Ducts of its Glands, or exhausted its Spirits, a Dram is good before Dinner ... Drams are chiefly useful to phlegmatic Constitutions, bulky Bodies, or old Age, and such as have weak and lax Stamina.” See Short, *Discourses on tea, sugar, milk*, 169, who also recommended Rum (*Ibid.*, 178).

98 Schäfer, *Old Age and Disease in Early Modern Medicine*, 36–37. About milk see Hill, *The Old Man’s Guide*, 43–44.

99 Anonymous, *The nurse’s guide*, 125.

included milk pottage and thin rice pudding that were recommended as food for breakfast.¹⁰⁰ Newly introduced beverages in Europe also became topics of discussion within regimens, as we can find different effects of tea and coffee: “In this manner it strengthens the stomach and assists digestion; it keeps the body from emptiness without loading it. (...) Tea in this quantity is also sufficient for the great purpose of diluting; and it refreshes the spirits more than any other liquid.”¹⁰¹ Hill advised a cup of chocolate for breakfast, and added: “Coffee I cannot advise generally: But the exceptions against tea are in a great measure groundless.”¹⁰²

Despite their age, the elderly were encouraged to remain active in order to help their bodies maintain vitality. **Exercise** was regarded as a means of quickening natural heat and assisting circulation.¹⁰³ Moderate exercise, together with bathing, was believed to preserve circulation and to stimulate secretions as well as the expulsion of excrements.¹⁰⁴ As Floyer explained:

*THE Pulse is accelerated, and is made quicker and greater by moderate Exercise; but becomes less and languid by the Immoderate. That is good Exercise, when the Breath and Pulse are accelerated, the Heat is increased, the Flesh is hardened, the Perspiration and other Secretions promoted ... Riding is the best (...) All sort of Work are Exercises, but these are too violent, Digging, Plowing, Sawing, carrying Burdens, Ringing, Mowing, Hunting, cleaving Wood, Pounding, Racing, Travelling, Dancing, driving a Chariot. THESE are gentle Exercises, Sailing, pruning Trees, Riding, bowling, Billiards, Nine Pins, Fishing, Walking, some of these we must use if suitable to the Strength ... For Women, Dancing, Walking, Riding, Spinning, Housewifery.*¹⁰⁵

100 Hill, *The Old Man's Guide*, 43–44.

101 Short, *Discourses on tea, sugar, milk*. See also Hill, *The Old Man's Guide*, 39.

102 Hill, *The Old Man's Guide*, 12.

103 “Give no place to Idleness, but use Lawful and Innocent Exercises.” Tryon, *Wisdom's dictates*, 7; Hill, *The Old Man's Guide*, 23.

104 Hill, *The Old Man's Guide*, 7. Cheyne, *An essay of health and long life*, 205: “Moderate Exercise and Baths preserve the Circulation, and irritate all the Secretions, as well as Expulsion of Excrements. Exercise is only to purge off Superfluities. If these therefore, be careful not to exceed.” Floyer, *Medicina Gerocomica*, 16: “Moderate Exercise and Baths preserve the Circulation, and irritate all the Secretions, as well as Expulsion of Excrements.”

105 Floyer, *Medicina Gerocomica*, 16–17. Similar Hill, *The Old Man's Guide*, 6: “If the pulse beat too quick and high, the diet must be lower; if too slow and weak, the food must be somewhat richer.”

Maintaining proper circulation was considered essential; however, it was emphasised that movement should not be excessively vigorous. Exercise was recommended on a daily basis, preferably in the morning and always on an empty stomach. It was considered best to follow forms of exercise to which one was accustomed: walking,¹⁰⁶ gardening¹⁰⁷ Bowling, Chariot, horse raiding,¹⁰⁸ or as noted, “The Home Exercises, such as playing at Tennis and Billiards, Dancing, Fencing, and the like, ought to be follow’d only when the Season forbids being Abroad; for being in the Air, contributes much towards the Benefit of Exercise.”¹⁰⁹ If older individuals were unable to engage in exercise, they were advised to compensate through friction and the use of a flesh-brush.¹¹⁰ Since older individuals could not always engage in as much exercise as required, they were advised to regulate their diet more carefully as a compensatory measure.

Conclusion

Most authors shared one characteristic: they provided advice on how to reach old age but offered little guidance on managing the diseases that accompanied it. Official medicine of the period remained relatively powerless in the face of many age-related ailments. Instead, their recommendations combined general, stereotypical advice with practical guidance. Although the concept of balance was no longer framed strictly in humoral terms, its

106 Floyer, *Medicina Gerocomica*, 16–17: “waking spends the Spirits, and makes the Pulse small and rare.”

107 Hill, *The Old Man’s Guide*, 21. “THE only danger in this healthy and happy course is, that it is too alluring. Let him who delights in it take an invariable resolution, never to let his fondness for the garden carry him out too early, or keep him there too late. TO such as are fond of gardening, nothing affords so happy, or so constant exercise. We do not mean that they should dig or weed the ground; but to use such employment as will give exercise without labour; and such as no hand will so well perform as that of the master. SUCH are the trimming of shrubs, and flowering plants; the management of espaliers, the removal of seedling flower-roots; the thinning of fruit upon the trees.”

108 Hill, *The Old Man’s Guide*, 20–21. For sailing as exercise: Gilchrist writes about possibility of curing a middle-aged men (Gilchrist, Ebenezer: *The use of sea voyages in medicine: and particularly in a consumption, with observations on that disease*, London, 1771, 264). See also Fuller, Francis: *Medicina Gymnastica: or a treatise concerning the power of exercise, with respect to the animal oeconomy: and the great necessity of it in the cure of several distempers*. London, 1705.

109 Cheyne, *An essay of health and long life*, 95.

110 Hill, *The Old Man’s Guide*, 23.

underlying logic remained largely unchanged.¹¹¹ While Helen Yallop has noted that texts on aging devoted less attention to dietary advice and more to the mind, moods, and social interaction,¹¹² diet nevertheless remained a central concern, as demonstrated by the examples discussed above.

While it was possible to live a long life without adhering to a regimen, no guarantee of such an outcome was assumed. Neglecting a regimen was often portrayed as inviting the premature onset of old age, understood as a form of punishment for disregarding bodily discipline in youth.¹¹³ As Richard Steele wrote: “In short, a Cheerful Heart, a Sober Diet, and moderate Exercise, may defer Old-age for a time; but come it will at length, even an House of Stone will at last decay, and grow out of repair.”¹¹⁴ Old age could thus be interpreted as a moral consequence of failing to observe bodily discipline earlier in life.

To summarise, the ideal old man was advised to work little, engage in minimal sexual activity, eat sparingly, and avoid excessive excitement, anxiety, and anger. This raises the question, however, of how strictly these rules were expected to be followed. On this point, John Trusler offered a more nuanced perspective:

Although it has been an old saying, as foolish as common, Qui medicè vivit, miserè vivit; he that lives by rule, lives miserably; yet experience teaches us the contrary, and grounded upon pure reason and the contents of these pages: that he who pays no regard to the injunctions of nature, both shortens his life and destroys the comforts of it. In short, would you see without spectacles, go without crutches, or the help of a stick; would you lie easy in your bed, not telling the clock or wishing for day; would you eat with an appetite and be young in strength when you are old in years: in fact, would you enjoy yourself, and every thing about you, and lengthen your life to the latest period; exercise your reason and attend to the advice here given, for Qui medicè vivit, sine

111 Schäfer, *Old Age and Disease in Early Modern Medicine*, 177.

112 Yallop, “Representing Aged Masculinity in Eighteenth-Century England”, 196.

113 “Despise not the Rules for promoting Health and Temperance, the ways of God and Nature are plain and simple, but mighty in operation and effects.” (Tryon, *Wisdom’s dictates*, Foreword, unpaginated).

114 Steele, *A discourse concerning old-age*, 10.

*medicis diu vivet. He that lives by rule and wholesome precepts, is a physician to himself, and needs not the help of others.*¹¹⁵

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