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Ignore the fear-mongering. Life is good, and getting longer.

Editorial: Canada's record on infant mortality is encouraging

by macleans.ca on Wednesday, October 9, 2013 10:21am - 0 Comments

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WHAT IS THIS (?)



Lucas Oleniuk / TorontoStar / Getty Images

Dwelling on death is rarely cause for good cheer. And yet, the latest Canadian mortality figures offer some very concrete reasons for celebration. Life is getting longer for everyone in Canada—from newborns to those who've been around the block a few times. Thankfully, the new evidence also punctures some tired myths of the Canadian condition.

Last week, [Statistics Canada updated](#) its newest life expectancy projections. A female baby born today will live to see the year 2097—83.6 years from now. Male babies can look forward to hitting 79.3 years old. Combining genders, newborn Canadians have been adding an average of 2.4 months to their lifespans every year for the past several decades.

Older Canadians are also living longer. Canadian females aged 65 can now expect to live another 21 years, males another 19. It's also the case that Canadian men are slowly closing the lifespan gap with women. So life is not only getting longer, it's getting fairer, as well. (And however you measure it, British Columbians are the longest-living folks in the country.)

All this happy news reflects rising education levels among all Canadians, falling poverty rates and a health care system that, however maligned, is steadily improving. It should also put an end to the frequently heard canard that Canadians are somehow eating themselves to an early death. Last year, for example, the Ontario Medical Association claimed that "today's children may be the first in the history of North America to live shorter lives than their parents" due to obesity. The doctors' group went on to demand a whole host of draconian food regulations, including taxes, bans and grotesque warning labels on juice cartons and pizza boxes. The evidence, however, is entirely to the contrary. We're living longer than ever.

Alongside rising life expectancy, the Stats-Can report also points to good news on infant mortality. At 4.8 deaths per 1,000 live births, the risk a newborn will die within his or her first year of life has fallen to the lowest level ever recorded in this country, going back to the 1920s. The decline has been particularly sharp in the past few decades. As recently as 1981, a newborn faced a mortality rate exactly twice the current level: 9.6 per cent.

If this fact comes as a surprise to most Canadians, it's probably because of efforts by various groups to convince everyone that our record on infant mortality is an international embarrassment.

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- More than seven.
- Never.

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This past April, UNICEF placed Canada 22 out of 29 countries worldwide in a survey of infant mortality statistics. “Three of the richest nations in the developed world—Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States—are placed in the bottom third of the infant mortality league table” the international report scolded. And the Conference Board of Canada ranked us 16th out of 17 countries, saying our “infant mortality rate is shockingly high.”

Beyond the recent improvement, there’s good reason to dismiss these international tables as phony comparisons. The definition of what constitutes a live birth varies widely across countries and plays a huge role in such statistics. According to the World Health Organization, Canada and the U.S. together experience a rate of premature births nearly 50 per cent higher than that of other developed countries, due to social and cultural factors, such as the rising age of new mothers, in vitro fertilization techniques and multiple births. The Canadian medical establishment’s willingness and capacity to treat extremely premature babies inevitably raises the failure rate. But this is no cause for shame.

While there’s always room for improvement—infant mortality figures are noticeably higher in Nunavut, Manitoba and Saskatchewan, due to generally poorer health conditions in Native communities—Canadians ought to be able to recognize encouraging news when we see it. Life is good in Canada. And getting longer.

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