

# IAN KILBRIDE

NEWS VIEWS AND OPINION



January 2024

## *Who Wants To Live Forever?*

The late great Queen lead man, Freddie Mercury, balefully sang, “Who wants to live forever?” The poignancy of the lyrics were made all the more powerful by the knowledge that he himself was dying of AIDS. If only he could have lived for a few years longer. Today, medical science and treatment means that HIV is no longer a death sentence, but rather a chronic condition that can be successfully managed. This is progress.

But medical progress also raises profoundly important questions about longevity and life extension that go to the heart of the human condition, medical ethics, class relations, national demographics, power relationships, global politics, the economy and indeed the very survival of the human species.

Particularly rich and equally famous businesspeople are pouring literally hundreds of millions of dollars into companies searching for the elixir of long (if not unending) life. These include the young Uber meister of artificial intelligence, Sam Altman, Google’s Larry Page, Pay Pal’s Peter Thiel and the ubiquitous Jeff Bezos. To date, there is no indication that either Donald Trump or Joe Biden have bought in. Perhaps this is beyond science.

The abovementioned modern icons of innovation foresee the potential to extend human life by ten years in the relatively short term and of course view this as an opportunity for companies such as Retro Sciences not only to revolutionise modern medicine, but in fact, to change the mortality of the human species as we know it. Surely such companies represent potentially the greatest start up disrupters company of all time? After all, who would not pay the highest price for immortality, that most elusive of all searches?

Yet while white coat clad scientists in Silicon Valley are confident that life extension and by further extension immortality, are scientific possibilities, particularly when viewed against the historical trend of progressively longer average lifespans globally, others remain far more sceptical not just of the science and medicine behind such claims, but also the ethics and desirability of these endeavours.

While the cause of human aging remains to this day an area of disagreement and dispute, a conventional view is that aging is in fact a disease. Consequently, it holds that just like other diseases, aging can be treated, prevented and cured. By the way, the aging thesis was supported by non-other than South Africa’s most famous surgeon, Dr Chris Barnard, who spent quite some time looking into anti-aging therapies and treatments. This goes to a more nuanced question and that is whether it is longevity we seek, or quality of life? In other words, some clinicians believe that there is little point in extending life for decades if one’s quality of life is poor due to the aging process. On this view, life extension only prolongs the process of dying and who on Earth wants to live a longer life in pain or in a decrepit state? So, the two things to some degree have to be separated - longevity and quality of life.



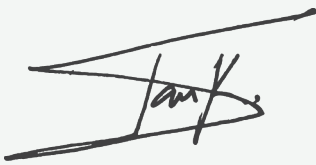
If aging is a disease and can be slowed, or indeed cured, then logically it would seem that barring external factors, those successfully treated for aging could live forever. Following this through, does this then mean that only the wealthiest who could afford this life-giving treatment would live forever and the rest of humanity would be doomed to mortality by the age of three score and ten? Surely this would be the perfect recipe for the establishment and sustainability of a superhuman species?

What about if anti-aging treatment was available on the NHI? If everyone elected to be treated, what exactly would this do the population of mankind? Some contend that the carrying capacity of Mother Earth is around ten billion. What then if there were no deaths from aging, but rather continual and unending population growth? It makes one think that perhaps Stephen Hawking and Elon Musk are right, humankind would have to begin colonising outer space and quickly to survive!

Much of this may be fanciful, but we don't really know where science, biotechnology and artificial intelligence are taking humankind. Is this into a perpetually better state in which all our lives are immeasurably improved (surely, we are grateful that we live in an era in which modern medicine ensures a better quality of life than that of our grandparents?). Or are developments moving at such a pace that we are in fact losing control of our own destiny and rather becoming the guinea pigs of scientific experimentation?

Given his unique contribution to music and entertainment, I am sure Freddie Mercury would have wished for a longer and healthier life. But would he have wanted to live forever?

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ian K.', enclosed within a hand-drawn, irregular rectangular frame.