



# Rust among the gold

**F**red retired at 60. He and his wife sold their home and moved to a country retirement community. They were looking forward to spending their golden years together but after only a few months his wife collapsed and died from an acute myocardial infarction. Fred was broken hearted; perhaps without realizing it, he had always depended on her to care for his needs. He soon lapsed into depression but refused to seek medical care. He spent most of his time in bed and rarely left his apartment. A neighbour kindly took on the job of getting Fred's weekly groceries as well as a 48 oz. bottle of rye whiskey. Fred was no cook and the neighbour noticed that a lot of food was going out in the garbage. After several months, the neighbour realized that Fred was now seriously ill. She called the V.O.N. (Victoria Order of Nurses.) Arrangements were then made to have him transferred to the nearest hospital located in a nearby city.

A thorough medical examination included a battery of laboratory tests. The abnormal results included the following: blood hemoglobin, serum iron, folate and B12 were all low. His serum albumin was low and his alkaline phosphatase (AP) and aspartate aminotransferase (AST) were both elevated. It was clear from Fred's physical state that he was malnourished and the hematology results

confirmed that he was iron deficient.

His serum albumin, AP and AST results would be compatible with liver disease perhaps due to alcohol abuse however this turned out to be only partly correct. He was transferred to a nursing home where Fred was encouraged to get out of bed for most of the day and to participate in the home's exercise program. He received regular counseling and was soon weaned back onto a proper diet – as prepared by the hospital.

Within a few weeks all of his laboratory results had returned to normal. His earlier results, where the AP was raised and the albumin was low, was attributed in part to excessive immobility caused by all the time he spent in bed (astronauts, while weightless in space, have similar changes). His elevated AST was caused by what is called 'enzymes induction' – the alcohol he was consuming had stimulated his liver to boost the level of AST. The reduced level of folate and B12 could also be attributed in part to alcohol abuse and this was reversed by intramuscular injection of these vitamins.

### Discussion

The aging process is very complex; it manifests itself in different ways and at different times in people's lives. Without appropriate physical exercise and mental stimulation, old

age comes with a loss of muscle mass and a gain in fat deposits; the brain tends to conform to the saying "use it or lose it". In some cases an older person may lapse into a poor diet not because they lose their appetite but because of more mundane things: they cannot chew their food because of dental problems; they may have difficulty in swallowing, especially liquids and in this case they are encouraged to add a thickening agent to their coffee and other liquids (this tastes as bad as it sounds!). Chronic constipation is very common and daily ingestion of laxatives may result; and of course chronic diseases, often two or three affect many senior citizens; and cancer in its many forms will be common.

Older people are placed in long-term care facilities where they are susceptible to nosocomial infections such as infections of the uro-genital tract and the respiratory system. Details of this topic are given in another article that appears in this issue of *Advocate*.

It has been shown in many studies that a person will consume the majority of their "healthcare costs" in the last few years of their life.

Gerontology is the study and practice of dealing with geriatric cases. The percentage of older people is rising and although gerontology is a certified medical specialty, family doctors provide most care in this area. JLB ❖

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With the above age-related issues one wonders why the last stage of life is called the "golden years". Perhaps the actual start of the golden years is now and it belongs to the generation Y who, as boomers age, will benefit from the increased job opportunities and long-term security in the healthcare industry. ❖

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