

- (3) Textbooks that have at least one chapter on aging. This is the case in four clinical textbooks, which appear to be the more popular ones. They deal with aging in the most detail, but do not label it as a disease. Instead, all four textbooks present aging as partly normal and partly pathological. Problems arising from this distinction are recognized by all textbooks. However, none provide a rationale for viewing aging as a natural and non-pathological part of senescence, or define criteria for distinguishing pathological and non-pathological elements of senescence.

2.3 Discussion

The aim of this study is to examine the extent to which medicine still relies on the traditional distinction between normal aging and disease. Based on its etiology, we argue that senescence is a pathological process and phenomenon. By contrast, non-pathological senescence is a relic concept rooted in traditional ideas about aging, whose origins seem to lie as far back as the writings of the Roman physician Galen in the second century AD.³⁹ Interestingly, our analysis reveals considerable variety in the way that aging is presented in medical textbooks. It is at times presented as an underlying risk factor for disease, or a modulator for drug dosages, or looked at in biogerontological terms, or barely mentioned at all. Only four out of fourteen textbooks examined consider the nature of aging itself, and the relation between aging and disease. Here aging is seen not as a disease, but as something between a pathological and normal process. This diverse pattern of representation of aging across medical textbooks appears to reflect linguistic confusion caused by the multiple and easily conflated meanings of the English word aging. This confusion impacts on medical understanding and medical care.

What are the implications of this pattern of representation of aging? Given that some textbooks barely refer to aging, and those that do rarely discuss the nature of aging or its relationship to pathology, this suggests that many medical students are left in the dark about these critical issues. Moreover, regardless of which textbook medical students use, they will not be taught that aging is a disease. Not even the more popular textbooks that discuss aging support this notion. Instead, they explain that aging lies somewhere between normal and pathological processes. This distinction is artificial, confusing and problematic, especially when classifications vary, as seen with sleep disturbances. Therefore, one clinician may refrain from treatment, dismissing sleep disturbances as normal, whilst another clinician may seek treatment. More broadly, failing to understand senescence as pathology is not only inadequate in scientific terms, but also a barrier to delivering quality treatment to the elderly. Underlining this point, the surgeon Gawande (2014) acknowledges that “(...) scientific advances have turned the processes of aging and dying into medical experiences, matters to be managed by health care professionals. And we in the medical world have proved alarmingly unprepared for it” (p. 6).⁴⁰