

Aging: Natural or Disease? A View from Medical Textbooks

S. JANAC^a, B. CLARKE^b AND D. GEMS*^a

^aUniversity College London, Institute of Healthy Ageing, Gower Street, London, WC1E 6BT, UK; ^bUniversity College London, Department of Science and Technology Studies, Gower Street, London, WC1E 6BT, UK
*E-mail: david.gems@ucl.ac.uk

2.1 Introduction

Whether a given condition is labelled as a disease or not can depend on a number of factors—including linguistics. For example, in one survey people were asked of 60 different conditions whether they considered them to be a disease or not.¹ The study found that alcoholism was seen as a disease, but smoking not. In some ways this is an odd finding since both—broadly speaking—elicit dependence symptoms, involve substance abuse and are detrimental to health in the long-term. Plausibly, this quirk reflects the choice of words employed in the survey. Perhaps if the terms used had instead been *drinking* and *nicotine addiction*, the classification would have come out the other way around.

Difficulties of classification also affect *aging*. For example, if one went to the doctor and asked for a prescription for anti-aging drugs, their response would likely be surprise, amusement or perhaps mild irritation. This is because aging, in the medical field, is not regarded as a disease.