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WORLD

Can You Die of Old Age? More Doctors Are Saying Yes

In Japan, it is the No. 3 cause of death, and Queen Elizabeth II's passing prompts discussion of the term's appropriateness



By *Miho Inada* [Follow](#)

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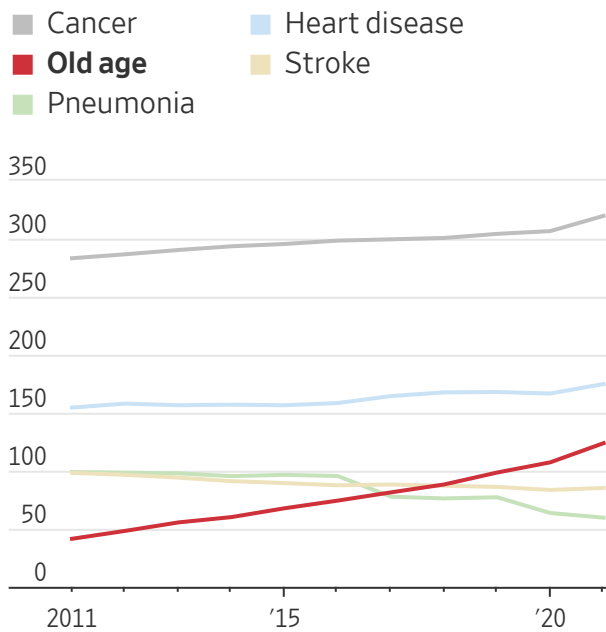
TOKYO—In announcing last week that Queen Elizabeth II died peacefully at age 96, Buckingham Palace didn't give a cause.

It hasn't been publicly disclosed whether the queen suffered from a particular fatal ailment, but the circumstances pointed to a debate that has been growing in Japan, one of the world's most aged nations. When a very old person dies without any obvious trigger, should doctors try to come up with a cause? Or is it acceptable to say that the person died of old age?

Doctors are increasingly going with the latter. The third-most-common cause of death in Japan last year was *rōsui*, a word that combines characters meaning “old age” and “decline.” It is generally translated as dying of old age, and it accounted for more than one in 10 deaths, trailing only cancer and heart disease.

Different Diagnosis

Annual deaths per 100,000 Japanese



Source: Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare

“We would say these days, ‘She had all sorts of conditions but since she was old, let’s say she died of old age,’ ” said Akihisa Iguchi, a gerontologist and emeritus professor at Nagoya University. He said families are usually fine with that.

Dr. Iguchi said rōsui could become the nation's No. 1 cause of death as aging advances.

Japan's view remains an outlier. Old age isn't on the World Health Organization's top-10 list of causes of death globally, nor on the U.S. top-10 list released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Heart disease, cancer and Covid-19 were the top three causes of death in the U.S. in 2020.

The debate isn't just about statistics. It also gets at the choices families and doctors face when an elderly person grows frail, perhaps suffering from a variety of ailments that aren't individually life-threatening. They must decide how aggressively to treat those ailments and how to ensure the person's comfort.

Putting the name of a disease on a death certificate—such as respiratory disease or pneumonia, both on the U.S. top-10 list and common among the elderly—prompts questions about what was done to treat that disease. Death from old age, by contrast, suggests a kind of inevitability.

The palace hasn't described how the queen's family, including her heir, King Charles III, addressed these questions.

Some in Japan, as they mourned the monarch's passing, observed how she remained active until nearly the end and then, according to the palace's statements, rested comfortably in her final hours and died peacefully. In her final public appearance, two days before her death, the queen was standing with a cane and smiling as she appointed the U.K.'s new prime minister.

"It was not a tragic but a natural ending," said Kazuhiro Nagao, a doctor in western Japan who specializes in end-of-life care. "It's the kind of death that would be considered ideal in Japan."

Dr. Nagao said he writes the two characters rōsui on about half of the 160 death certificates he signs each year.



That cause has been given for many prominent Japanese people including Kyocera Corp. founder Kazuo Inamori, who died in August at age 90. Local media cited old age when former Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone died in 2019 at 101.

Still, concern remains about overuse of the term, especially if it suggests that doctors and medical staff didn't try to figure out what was wrong with an aging patient or gave up on treatment that could have helped.

In its manual on death certificates, Japan's health ministry highlights in red that *rōsui* should be named as the cause of death only when no other cause can be specified.

If a patient is unable to swallow food or drink owing to age-related decline and develops pneumonia—a not-uncommon scenario—both old age and pneumonia should be cited on the certificate and the death counted under pneumonia, the ministry says.

Dr. Iguchi, who is 78, said that when he was a young doctor, his colleagues considered it shameful to write down old age on a death certificate because it meant they failed to identify the underlying cause, which they had been taught must exist behind every death under Western medical practice generally adopted in Japan. Dr. Nagao said some doctors, particularly at university hospitals, continue to avoid the term because it has yet to be medically defined.

The WHO's International Classification of Diseases has been growing since the end of the 19th century and now includes 17,000 diagnostic categories that doctors also use when identifying cause of death. In January, the latest version of the list, ICD-11, included old age for the first time.

After criticism that the inclusion of the term stigmatized old people and implied that they were automatically sick simply because of their age, the WHO replaced the term with "aging-associated decline in intrinsic capacity."

Dr. Nagao said rōsui wasn't a disease but a natural ending. "It's part of Japanese culture that could be part of global culture too," he said.



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