

Spinal Cord Injury and Aging: Challenges and Recommendations for Future Research

ABSTRACT: Population aging, caused by reductions in fertility and increasing longevity, varies by country and is anticipated to continue and to reach global proportions during the 21st century. Although the effects of population aging have been well documented for decades, the impact of aging on people with spinal cord injury (SCI) has not received similar attention. It is reasonable to expect that population aging features such as the increasing mean age of the population, share of the population in the oldest age groups, and life expectancy would be reflected in SCI population demographics. Although the mean age and share of the SCI population older than 65 yrs are increasing, data from the National Spinal Cord Injury Statistical Center suggest that life expectancy increases in the SCI population have not kept the same pace as those without SCI in the last 15 yrs. The reasons for this disparity are likely multifactorial and include the changing demographics of the SCI population with more older people being injured; susceptibility of people with SCI to numerous medical conditions that impart a health hazard; risky behaviors leading to a disproportionate percentage of deaths as a result of preventable causes, including septicemia; changes in the delivery of health services during the first year after injury when the greatest resources are available; and other unknown factors. The purposes of this paper are (1) to define and differentiate general population aging and aging in people with SCI, (2) to briefly present the state of the science on health conditions in those aging with SCI, and finally, (3) to present recommendations for future research in the area of aging with SCI.