Unfair to men

At the age of 60 I feel discriminated against: if I were a woman I would be eligible for my old age pension and a whole range of benefits ranging from free travel on public transport to exemption from library fines. This would be equitable if women aged 60 had a shorter life expectancy than men of the same age; but in all Western countries old women outnumber old men—the difference is an amazing five women to every man at the age of 90. Yet argument continues as to the extent that this sex difference in longevity is an innate physiological variation or is mainly attributable to behavioural factors. Certainly much of the premature mortality among men is due to their risk taking, but evidence is accumulating that some of the sex difference is innate.

The distinguished geneticist Sir Cyril Clarke has recently drawn attention (British Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology 1995; 102:677) to the effects of the Y chromosome on early embryonic growth. Male embryos grow faster than females from the first week of life, long before the gonads have developed and long before the embryo secretes sex hormones. Clarke and his coauthor Professor Ursula Mittwoch go on to suggest that this difference in growth rate may be responsible for a lifelong higher metabolic rate in males and a shorter lifespan.

The data on differential longevity are certainly persuasive. In Western countries women live, on average, 5-10 years longer than men, with the biggest difference in the former USSR and the smallest in Greece and Japan. Much of the difference is explained by the risk-taking phenomenon: young men are much more likely than young women to die from road accidents, warfare, sports injuries, and suicide. In middle age men have a higher mortality from coronary heart disease, and later on many more men die from lung cancer, reflecting the sex differences in smoking in the first half of this century. Life expectation is still, however, longer for women than for men at the age of 65, when the hormonal advantages of being a woman have long since disappeared (except for those taking long term hormone replacement therapy) and the risk-taking difference should be less important. At the age of 65 a woman living in Britain may expect to live a little over 18 years, while a man of the same age may look forward to only 14 years.

Some epidemiologists have claimed that around half the sex difference in lifespan is related to smoking, in which case we should expect the gap to narrow in the next half century. Other factors are likely to widen the gap: one example is recognition of inequities in the access women have to treatments such as coronary bypass grafting.

The concept of earlier retirement for women goes back to the origins of the old age pension, when a typical husband was older than his wife and it seemed equitable that they should be able to retire together. Today few people manage to stay in employment until the age of 60/65; most are made redundant or offered early retirement long before that. But I hope we can look forward to a better society in which more account would be taken of disadvantaged males who have to struggle to overcome the disadvantage of having only one X chromosome.—TONY SMITH, associate editor, BMJ