

Science and spirituality of ageing

ANEETA SUNDARARAJ learns from Professor Suresh Rattan that the term anti-ageing is contradictory

AT LAST, there is good news for women ever 35. Those who choose to give birth to their first child later in life tend to live longer. So says Professor Suresh Rattan, an expert on biogerontology, the study of the biological processes of ageing.

Rattan's discussion on ageing begins with, "I don't like the word anti-ageing. It's impossible to define. Just like rich-poor. You're either rich or poor. Not both. Ageing is inevitable."

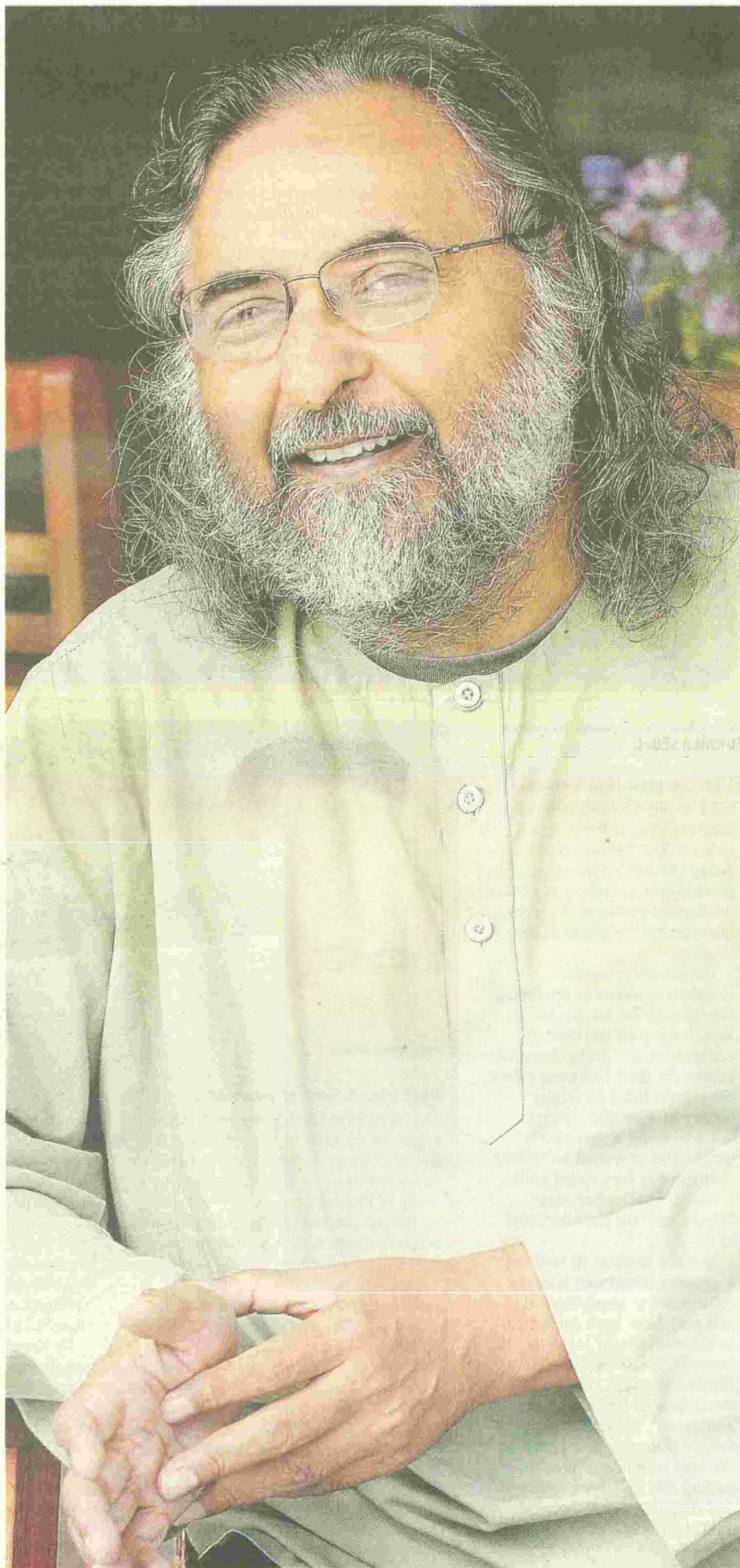
"There are no genes which cause us to age," he says. "Although I identified the 'geronto gene' in 1984, I've spent all my time since then proving that this gene doesn't exist in the body. It's virtual and not there to make us old and die. Instead, it is busy doing the work of living. It's like darkness, you cannot spread darkness. It is the absence of light. Since evolution only works on the principle of life, if there is an absence of life, then you'll age. Or die."


This 56-year-old exuberant, semi-

professional tabla player was born and brought-up in Amritsar, Punjab. Upon completing his studies in India, he pursued a doctorate in the National Institute for Medical Research, Mill Hill, London in the early 1980s. When his plan to work in the US fell through, he went to work at a new laboratory on ageing in Aarhus, Denmark. He has remained there ever since.

He was in Kuala Lumpur recently for a dermatology conference. Rattan will return next March to speak at the First World Congress on Healthy Ageing (www.healthyageing.org).


This year's recipient of the prestigious Lord Cohen award for his contribution to the science of gerontology, Rattan says: "Being a scientist allows me to be a better human." He reveals how he came to such a conclusion when he speaks of the influence his family has had on his life. "One brother could synthesise complex data easily. He would listen to four lectures and then summarise them into one paragraph. The








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Why exactly do we age? From a biological perspective, ageing happens when a species has lived longer than its essential life span (which is the necessary time required for the species to reproduce). For homo sapiens, this is approximately 35 to 40 years. After this, the ageing process begins

— Rattan

other brother is, like me, an atheist."

Of his three sisters, the one he speaks of most is Mata Shiv Bani (an accomplished musician). "We argued when we were young and didn't speak to each other for a long time. I cannot remember what we argued about." Then, one night, after dinner, she told everyone not to wait up as she needed to practise her music. The next morning, she was still playing her music. Rattan was deeply touched, and recognised her love, honesty and commitment to her art because it was the same for him with science. Thereafter, they became firm friends.

It was also to this sister that Rattan turned to when their father passed away. By then, Mata Shiv Bani had become a sanyasin (the renunciation of the world in the Hindu belief system) and was living in an ashram in northern India. He wrote of his sorrow and told her she was lucky — since she believed in God, she could find some peace as it was God who determined their father's lifespan. Since he was a hardcore atheist, to whom could he go to find peace?

Her reply was, "I am jealous of you. I look forward to the day when I can get rid of these crutches of God."

For Rattan, it was a great compliment from a sanyasin to a scientist — it showed a weakness in that she needed God to find peace. "Scientists don't need God," he says, plainly. "I was free. It's like flying. When you fly, you are forced to travel

light. Science doesn't allow me to carry all that 'baggage' that comes with a belief in God."

None of this, however, means that he disregards spirituality or ethics. In fact, it's quite the opposite.

"Why I've stuck my neck out and done this pseudo-intellectual pontificating is because I don't like the misuse of the word 'spiritual'. Most of the time, religions have what's called the 'fear factor'. Science takes away this fear and everything has to be explained by humans. Not by a 'God'. To do this, scientists have to live and talk to each other."

An example of such "talk" is one of his books, *Where's Baba Gone?*, in which he tries to explain why we age and die.

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"Spirituality is how homo sapiens become human. Spirituality is your sense of feeling larger than yourself."

In philosophical terms, it is not a case of having no attachment to the material world; it is having complete attachment to a higher power.

Ultimately, Rattan concludes that science is the best way in which we humans can derive our spiritual and ethical systems.

Healthy way to age

MORE often than not, we're told that stress is bad for us. But Professor Suresh Rattan believes that stress can be of benefit in healthy ageing.

He defines stress as a "signal generated by any physical, chemical or biological factor which initiates a series of events in order to adapt and survive", which will affect the body (www.sureshrattan.com). The result of such an effect on the cells can be either bad or good. Conditions that cause such a process to happen can be physical, nutritional or mental.

For instance, one kind of stress that can result in something good is exercise. When we exercise, we are actually doing damage to the cells of the body. But this does not mean that we mustn't exercise. On the contrary, when the cells are damaged, the body's defence systems will be activated to counter this damage. When done properly, exercise may have an effect on the cells of the body that is so positive as to support life.

The trick is to choose your stress. Over-exercising is certain to cause harm. So is eating too much of one type of food or relaxing too much. The message that Rattan seems to impart is: "You mustn't run away from stress. Learn to choose the kind of stress that's good for you."

Level of concern

ZUHAILA SEDEK

EVEN the most health-conscious may face health problems.

Nestlé Omega Plus (NOP) 30 Days Cholesterol Challenge contestant Nazaruddin Abdullah, a 50-year-old father of three, says that he has always been careful about his diet. He doesn't smoke. He exercises regularly. So when told that his cholesterol level was 7.2, Nazaruddin was really taken aback. The normal level for an adult male should be between four and six.

"I was lucky to have detected it early, before something bad happened. I really have no idea why my cholesterol level is so high," says Nazaruddin.

He claims that he doesn't have much rice daily, but with the recent Hari Raya open houses he visited, he bent that rule.

"I felt breathless after eating and my heart felt heavier. It was then that I had a hunch that something was not right," he added. He took a blood test at a health roadshow and found out about his cholesterol.

With the support of his wife and children, he is now determined to correct the situation. He suspects that stress at work is a contributing factor.

"I am terrified of heart disease.

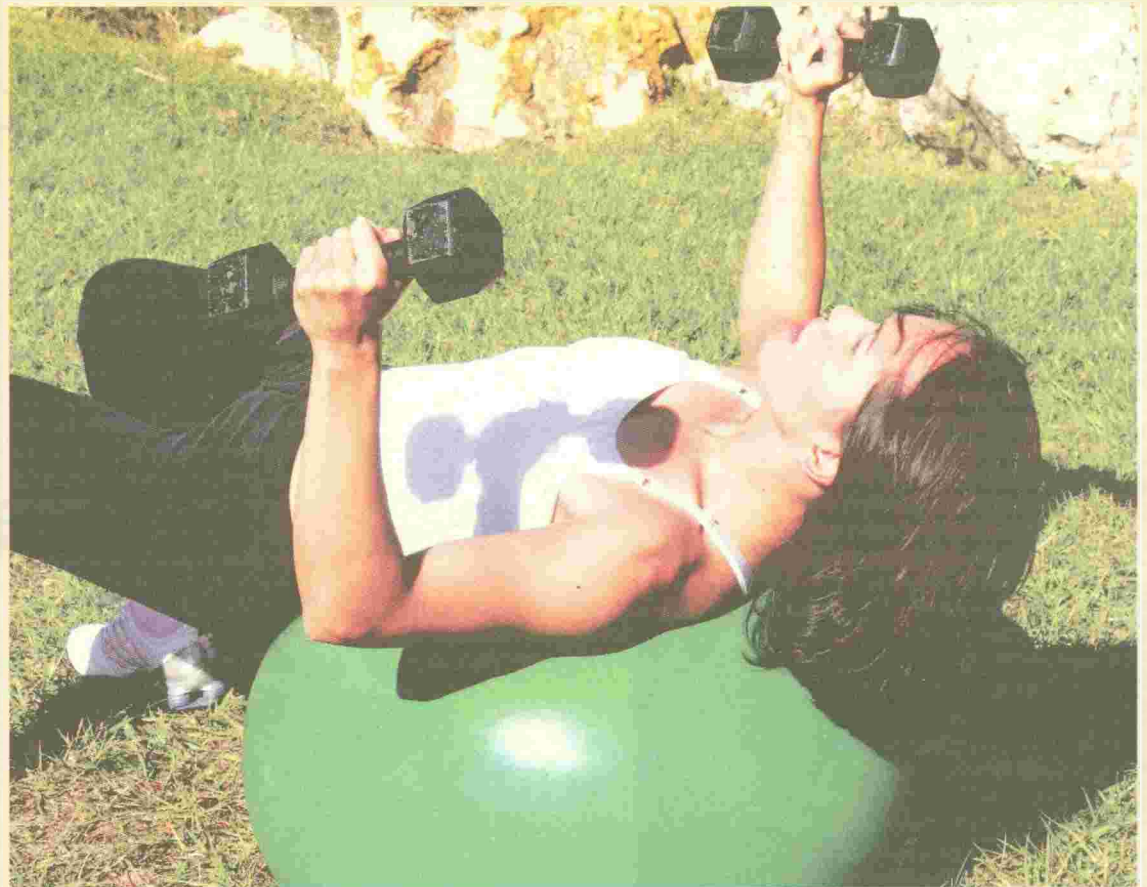


Worried about the possibility of having a heart disease, Nazaruddin is going all out to reduce his cholesterol level in 30 days

If this happens, things would be worse." He does not know about his other family members' levels. The technician is optimistic things will get better. For the challenge, he has to consume two glasses of NOP milk daily, for 30 days, to reduce his cholesterol level. The milk contains ActiCol, a type of plant sterol.

Plant sterols are believed to have the ability to lower cholesterol levels without affecting the HDL level, which is "good" for the body.

But depending on just the milk is not enough. Participants must keep



to a healthy diet and take regular exercise to lower their cholesterol.

The NOP 30 Days Challenge started on Oct 2 and will end on Nov 1.

The 30 contestants will go for another blood test to determine whether their cholesterol levels

have gone down. The top 20 contestants who have the highest percentage of cholesterol reduction will win RM500 and three months' supply of Nestlé Omega Plus.

zuhaila@nst.com.my

