**When do you know you're old enough to die? Barbara Ehrenreich has some answers**

By Lucy Rock, published in The Guardian newspaper

Four years ago, Barbara Ehrenreich, 76, reached the realisation that she was old enough to die. Not that the author, journalist and political activist was sick; she just didn’t want to spoil the time she had left undergoing myriad preventive medical tests or restricting her diet in pursuit of a longer life.

While she would seek help for an urgent health issue, she wouldn’t look for problems.

Now Ehrenreich felt free to enjoy herself. “I tend to worry that a lot of my friends who are my age don’t get to that point,” she tells the Guardian. “They’re frantically scrambling for new things that might prolong their lives.”

It is not a suicidal decision, she stresses. Ehrenreich has what she calls “a very keen bullshit detector” and she has done her research. The results of this are detailed in her latest book, Natural Causes: An Epidemic of Wellness, the Certainty of Dying, and Killing Ourselves to Live Longer, published on 10 April.

Part polemic, part autobiographical, Ehrenreich – who holds a PhD in cellular immunology – casts a skeptical, sometimes witty, and scientifically rigorous eye over the beliefs we hold that we think will give us longevity. She targets the medical examinations, screenings and tests we’re subjected to in older age as well as the multibillion-dollar “wellness” industry, the cult of mindfulness and food fads.

These all give us the illusion that we are in control of our bodies. But in the latter part of the book, Ehrenreich argues this is not so. For example, she details how our immune systems can turn on us, promoting rather than preventing the spread of cancer cells. When Ehrenreich talks of being old enough to die, she does not mean that each of us has an expiration date. It’s more that there’s an age at which death no longer requires much explanation.

“That thought had been forming in my mind for some time,” she says. “I really have no hard evidence about when exactly one gets old enough to die, but I notice in obituaries if the person is over 70 there’s not a big mystery, there’s no investigation called for. It’s usually not called tragic because we do die at some age. I found that rather refreshing.”

A recent exchange with a friend summed up what Ehrenreich hoped to achieve with Natural Causes. “I gave the book to a dear friend of mine a week ago. She’s 86 and she’s a very distinguished social scientist and has had a tremendous career. “She said: ‘I love this, Barbara, it’s making me happy.’ I felt ‘wow’. I want people to read it and relax. I see so many people my age – and this has been going on for a while – who are obsessed, for example, with their diets.

“I’m sorry, I’m not going out of this life without butter on my bread. I’ve had so much grief from people about butter. The most important thing is that food tastes good enough to eat it. I like a glass of wine or a bloody mary, too.”

Yet despite her thoughts on the “wellness” industry with its expensive health clubs (fitness has become a middle-class signifier, she says) and corporate “wellness” programs (flabby employees are less likely to be promoted, she writes), Ehrenreich won’t be giving up the gym anytime soon. She works out most days because she enjoys cardio and weight training and “lots of stretching”, not because it might make her live longer.

“That is the one way in which I participated in the health craze that set in this country in the 70s,” she says. “I just discovered there was something missing in my life. I don’t understand the people who say, ‘I’m so relieved my workout is over, it was torture, but I did it.’ I’m not like that.”

**What is So Good About Growing Old**By Helen Fields, Smithsonian Magazine

Forget about senior moments. The great news is that researchers are discovering some surprising advantages of aging Scientists are finding the mind gets sharper at a number of vitally important abilities as you get older.

Even as certain mental skills decline with age—what was that guy’s name again?—scientists are finding the mind gets sharper at a number of vitally important abilities. In a University of Illinois study, older air traffic controllers excelled at their cognitively taxing jobs, despite some losses in short-term memory and visual spatial processing. How so? They were expert at navigating, juggling multiple aircraft simultaneously and avoiding collisions.

People also learn how to deal with social conflicts more effectively. For a 2010 study, researchers at the University of Michigan presented “Dear Abby” letters to 200 people and asked what advice they would give. Subjects in their 60s were better than younger ones at imagining different points of view, thinking of multiple resolutions and suggesting compromises.

It turns out that managing emotions is a skill in itself, one that takes many of us decades to master. For a study published this year, German researchers had people play a gambling game meant to induce regret. Unlike 20-somethings, those in their 60s didn’t agonize over losing, and they were less likely to try to redeem their loss by later taking big risks.

These social skills may bring huge benefits. In 2010, researchers at Stony Brook University analyzed a telephone survey of hundreds of thousands of Americans and found that people over 50 were happier overall, with anger declining steadily from the 20s through the 70s and stress falling off a cliff in the 50s.

This may be news to people who equate being old with being sad and alone, but it fits with a body of work by Laura Carstensen, a psychologist at Stanford. She led a study that followed people ages 18 to 94 for a decade and found that they got happier and their emotions bounced around less. Such studies reveal that negative emotions such as sadness, anger and fear become less pronounced than in our drama-filled younger years.

Cornell sociologist Karl Pillemer and co-workers interviewed about 1,200 older people for the book 30 Lessons for Living: Tried and True Advice from the Wisest Americans. “Many people said something along these lines: ‘I wish I’d learned to enjoy life on a daily basis and enjoy the moment when I was in my 30s instead of my 60s,’” he says. Elderly interviewees are likely to “describe the last five or ten years as the happiest years of their lives.”

“We have a seriously negative stereotype of the 70s and beyond,” says Pillemer, “and that stereotype is typically incorrect.”

7a) Similarities about the benefits of old age

7b) Compare the writers perspectives and viewpoints on growing oold