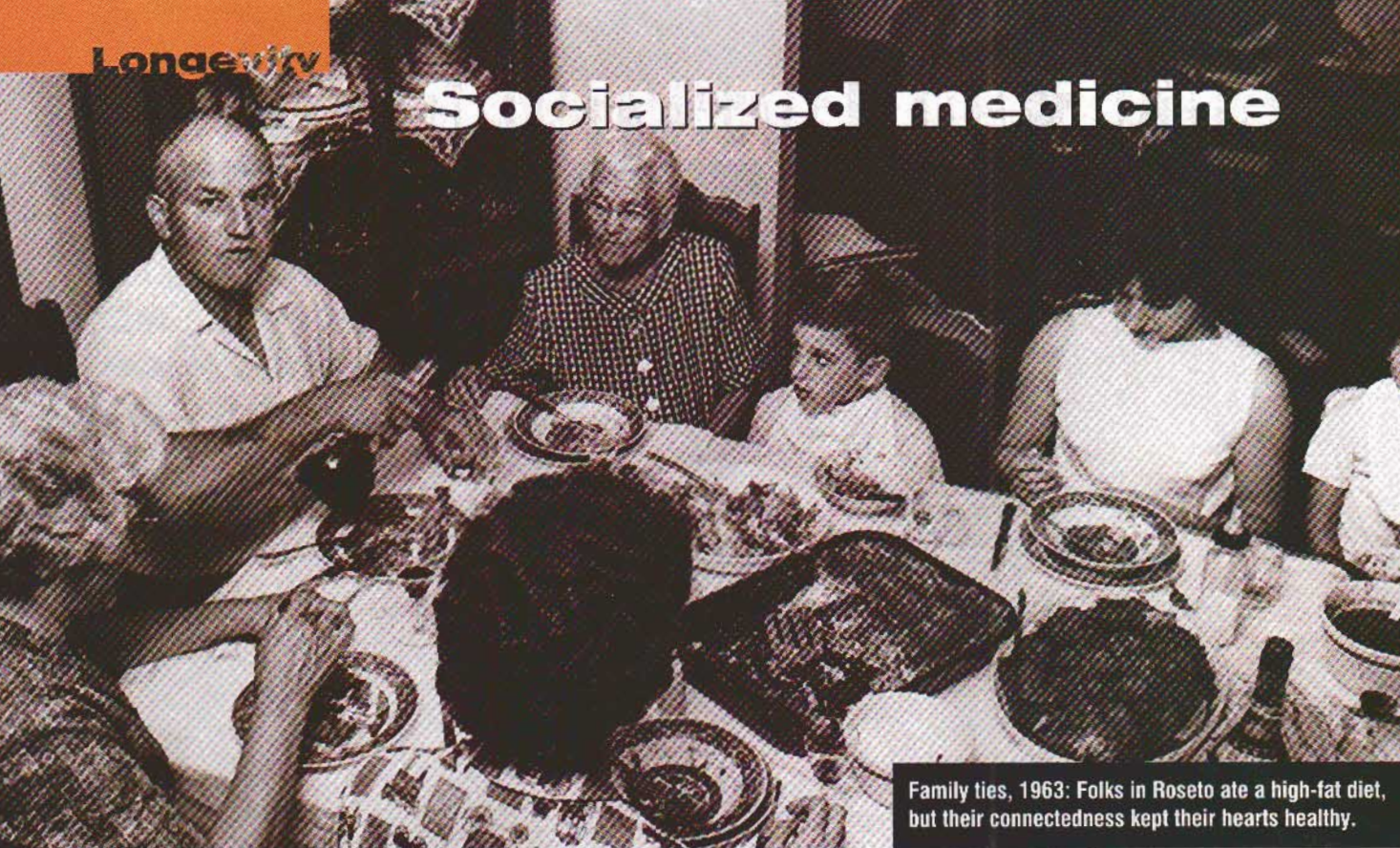


# Socialized medicine



Family ties, 1963: Folks in Roseto ate a high-fat diet, but their connectedness kept their hearts healthy.

“**N**o man is an island,” John Donne wrote in the 17th century. Today’s health experts would agree—and add, “especially if he wants to live a long, healthy life.”

Genes, exercise habits, diet and other lifestyle factors all help determine how long you’re likely to live. But medical experts say that social connectedness—maintaining strong bonds with friends and family, living in a close community and looking out for others—can also help safeguard your long-term health. In contrast, the sort of lonely, isolated and sometimes even overtly hostile lives so many of us live today can actually increase our susceptibility to heart disease and other deadly ailments. The good news is that whether you live in Green Acres or Greenwich Village, you *can* increase the communal presence in your life.

## The Roseto effect

When describing the health benefits a close community can bestow, scientists often point to the town of Roseto, founded by Italian immigrants in 1882 in the mountains of eastern Pennsylvania. For decades, despite a fairly normal prevalence of heart-attack risk factors, including smoking, hypertension, diabetes and a high-fat diet that included lots of lard (residents couldn’t afford to import olive oil), the heart attack rate in Roseto was less than half what it

**Close-knit communities are healthier and happier. You can be, too, no matter where you live.**

BY GLENN DEUTSCH

was in four neighboring communities and the U.S. population as a whole. This surprising phenomenon—apparently unrelated to genetic factors—was dubbed the Roseto effect, and it led researchers to search for the townspeople’s health secret.

Significantly, most Rosetans had roots in the same southern Italian hill town, which undoubtedly aided the creation of a friendly, cohesive society. But that was just one reason, says Stewart Wolf, MD, now a professor of medicine at Temple University School of Medicine in Philadelphia, who studied Rosetans between 1962 and 1985. The effect seems to have begun in 1896 with the arrival of a priest, Rev. Pasquale de Nisco, who helped the then-disorderly community establish a church, school, library and social clubs. He also promoted a rigorous work ethic; men toiled in slate quarries and women in small blouse factories with the goal of sending their children to college. Three generations often shared the same house, and elderly family members were respected by younger ones. There was no crime, and no one ever applied for public assistance. In short, the town took care of its own.

Things began to change around 1965, Wolf says, when heart disease deaths began to rise sharply, especially among the men. By 1985, even as Rosetans improved their diets,

# Longevity



**Drop on in:** When Rosetans moved away from the close bonds of a tiny town, their health paid the price.

the rate was almost equal to that in the rest of the U.S.

What caused this swift reversal? One possible reason was that instead of continuing the strenuous physical work their fathers and grandfathers had done, the men began taking bet-

health on a par with the more commonly accepted biological risk factors of blood pressure, cholesterol, bacterial and viral exposure, and aging itself." More simply put, rapid social change and lack of social connections are linked to disease. But just because you

## **A supportive community and close friends or family are linked to lower rates of cancer and heart disease**

ter-paying sedentary jobs. But social issues were involved as well. Wolf's research team discovered that the sharp rise in heart disease deaths coincided with a "conspicuous social change from family-centered attitudes toward more self-centered, materialistic concerns." Those who could afford to built big houses on the outskirts of town. Instead of dropping by to visit their neighbors in the evening, people began staying home and watching television. Despite retaining such communal habits as extended-family dinners on Sundays, the people of Roseto had been launched on the road to prosperity and modernity, and they had the heart problems that come with it.

### **Staying connected**

Wolf's research in Roseto and other areas demonstrated that "social support is a major factor in individual

lack the sense of community that kept those early Rosetans healthy doesn't mean you can't work toward including it in your own life now. Here's how:

**Develop and nurture relationships.** Social support—or lack of it—powerfully influences heart disease and mortality, says Kenneth R. Pelletier, MD, clinical associate professor of medicine at Stanford University School of Medicine and author of *Sound Mind, Sound Body* (Fireside, \$23). Likewise, a supportive community and close friends or family—what Pelletier calls "positive associations"—are linked to a lower incidence of cancer and heart disease, and fewer and shorter hospital stays.

Of course, most of us today don't live with our parents and grandparents, and we don't get together with our neighbors every evening. We have to make more of an effort to keep in

contact with people. But spending time with friends after work, sitting down with family for dinner most nights, joining a religious or social club, even just getting a roommate can make a big difference.

Reaching out to just about anyone can be valuable, Pelletier says: "It doesn't need to be a whole group of friends or an extended network of people. It can be one family member or one friend. It can be someone you work out with. Even the minimal contact you get in an online chat room is better than none."

**Find a mentor.** The early Rosetans looked to Rev. de Nisco for help with their problems, or they sought advice from their families. No matter how old or mature we are, it's good to have someone who can provide some perspective on our problems. "Especially in times of trauma, a mentor, someone who can advise or counsel you, can have a tremendous positive effect on your health," Pelletier says. "That person doesn't have to be a religious leader; he or she can be a parent, friend, teacher or significant other."

**Get religion.** The Rosetans' shared Catholicism helped unite them as a community. And religion itself has often been shown to promote good health and social connectedness. Practicing Mormons tend to enjoy good health wherever they live, Pelletier says, because the religion promotes not only a healthy lifestyle but close family ties as well. A similar advantage has been found among the Amish and Mennonites in America, Israeli commune members and other small-scale societies that promote stable social and spiritual bonds. And recent research shows that people who pray—or who are prayed for—sometimes recover from illness more quickly than others.

**Put money in its place.** Materialism eats away at civility and health, Wolf says. People who care too much about money tend to take jobs that pay well instead of ones that offer personal satisfaction or a less stressful environment.

Of course, finding a more fulfilling job isn't an option for everyone. But you can also seek satisfaction through

volunteering, which has been shown to enhance mental and physical health. Putting in time at the local animal shelter, working on a charitable event or just running errands for someone who needs help can be life-affirming and will increase your sense of belonging in your community. "One of the things that kills people is a lack of respect," Wolf says. "One of the things that nourishes people is achieving gratitude and respect."

**Consider moving.** You can maintain close ties in the city—just look how friendly everybody on *Seinfeld* is. What's more, some people find small towns *too* close. Still, you are more likely to develop closer relationships in a small community. "The average Joe is probably a little better off in a rural area," says Mark D. Hayward, PhD, a Pennsylvania State University sociologist. "Rural men are more socially connected. It's not just kinship. It's more that you're never anonymous." Among low-health-risk men, Hayward says, that connectedness can add an average of 1½ years more of life.

If you want to stay in the city, you can still live those small-town values: Join a local community organization, participate in clean-up projects, or try to make friends with your neighbors. Hey, it could happen.

### **Not just a longer life, a better one**

Working on your social connections won't just make your life healthier, less stressful and possibly longer; it will probably make you happier as well. Human beings are social animals; we *need* other people around, and the sense that we're making a difference in their lives, to make our own complete. And while the demands of the modern world can make maintaining those connections difficult, as they seem to have done in Roseto, it's still well worth the trouble. In terms of longevity *and* quality of life, the effort you make to keep your relationships thriving will continue to pay off for a long, long time. □

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