Aging is a universal experience. All of us are growing older and many will one day confront the challenge of caring for an aging parent. In the Arab region, as elsewhere, much of what we know about aging is socially constructed, imbued with stereotypes and unexamined assumptions. One of the most enduring paradigms in Arab culture is that our older adults are well regarded and their health and social needs are fulfilled by family members. It is time to interrogate this paradigm. Even if cultural values continue to call for holding in high esteem the wisdom and experience of older adults, social and economic realities have placed undue challenges on aging members in society and those who are expected to care for them.

These challenges are perhaps most felt in Lebanon, a country with increasing life expectancy and high rates of outmigration among young people. In the context of a weak public sector, Lebanese families who cannot provide the day-to-day care for an aging parent would have to draw upon whatever services are afforded by mostly religious-based, nongovernmental organizations or hire a live-in migrant female worker through the unscrupulous sponsorship system. Both arrangements are far from ideal. Though rise in the discourse on “successful aging” is an indication that we live in a society eager to enhance the well-being of older adults, this will not materialize simply by providing better medical care. It requires social policy approaches designed to enhance the agency of older adults, strengthen family support structures, ensure the availability of care at the important end-of-life stage, and counter negative images of aging.

This special issue of the Lebanese Medical Journal presents seven articles that address the intersection between aging and society. In addition to providing an overview of aging in Lebanon, the articles address, through empirical research, such critical issues as family relations, war-related stress, care at the end of life, and ageism. These are important determinants of the well-being of older adults worldwide and it is critical that they are researched and written about in our region. Furthermore, two articles in the special issue present models for integrating substantive content on aging in medical and nursing education in Lebanon. Each article in this special issue speaks both to public health and the medical communities.

The preparation of this special issue was a collaborative effort that materialized over the course of three years. The special issue sprung out of a conference titled: “Linking Research to Policy: Family Ties and Aging,” which was held at the American University of Beirut (AUB) in 2010. The conference was funded by the Doha International Family Institute and the Lebanese National Council for Scientific Research. It was co-organized by Eastern Michigan University and the University of Michigan in the United States, the Center for Studies on Aging, and the Faculty of Health Sciences at the AUB. This special issue is, likewise, a product of the concerted efforts of individuals in the three academic institutions and the Center for Studies on Aging.

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