

Our Guest Editor

Talks about
older men's health.



EDWARD H. THOMPSON, JR.

This issue of *Generations* is devoted to older men's health, which has long received inadequate attention among researchers, clinicians, and policy makers. Many would find that lack of attention surprising. Given that more than 39 million Americans currently are men 50 years of age or older, with the number expected to top 50 million by 2010, and given the relatively advantageous position of men in society, how could older men be overlooked? Yet, as our guest editor Edward Thompson contends, they do constitute an unseen minority when it comes to their health. Here, then, is a look at how gender, health, and aging interact.

Ed Thompson is professor and department chair of sociology and anthropology and director of gerontology studies at Holy Cross College. During his doctoral studies in sociology at Case Western Reserve University, Thompson became interested in aging, through specializing in family and medical sociology. His interest in the study of men was first piqued, he says, when he asked a professor who'd just distributed the syllabus for a course on sex roles, "Where's the stuff on men?" She told him there wasn't much, he disagreed, and she asked him to do an annotated bibliography. He did. That was in the late seventies. Since then, Thompson has forged a distinguished career devoted to examining the experiences of men, particularly older men.

Thompson has researched and written about social participation of older men, their religious experiences, sexuality, and later-life views of masculinity. He is editor of *Older Men's Lives*, a path-breaking collection of articles, and *Men as Caregivers* (with Betty J. Kramer), part of a long list of publications.

"Older men are an unseen minority when it comes to their health."

"The field really hasn't been looking at how men *as men* experience aging," Thompson says. "Men's power and better financial situation as compared to that of women have promoted a presumption that men have relatively few concerns and needs, so their physical and health experiences are less likely to be noticed. Yet, like women, men growing older face perplexing normal body changes and an increased risk of diseases and disorders caused by aging. And older men are at greater risk than women for a number of later-life health problems and have the highest suicide rate of anyone. In comparison to the attention directed toward younger men's health or women growing older, there is no doubt that older men are underserved.

"Men engage in a variety of health practices as a consequence of socially encouraged, gender-related behavior. For example, one man in four still smokes. Once we recognize that men see it as a way of 'performing masculinity,' we can come up with appropriate tactics to help them quit. And we can provide the information they need to better manage their own health.

"Putting together this issue of *Generations*, we found that the authors had all written a great deal about men's health, but many hadn't written much about older men. They were happy to have the opportunity. We need more efforts like the one in this issue, to combine what is known about health, aging, and gender, and to capitalize on that."

—Mary Johnson