DON'T LET THE OLD MAN IN

Midlife Reflections and Experiments

from DR ANDY TAY

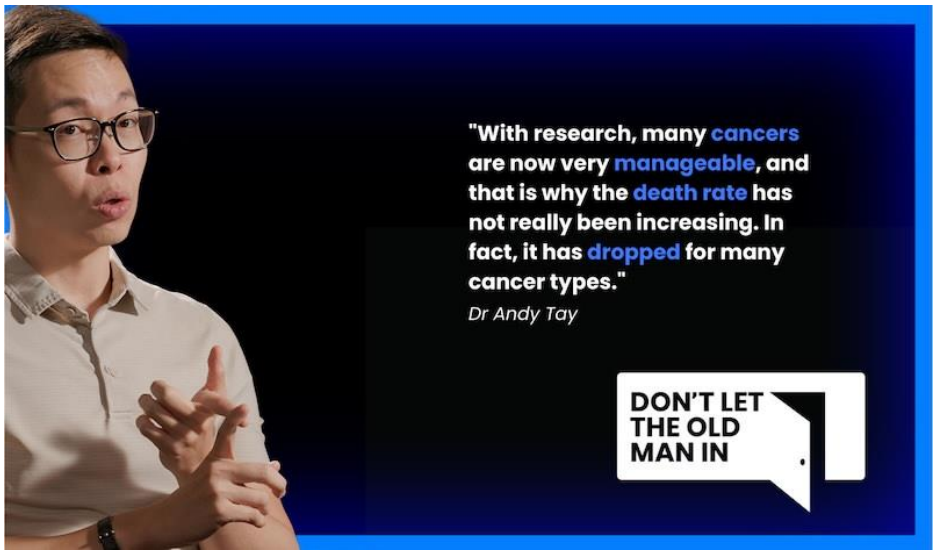
Introduction

As I sat down with Dr Andy Tay in Singapore, I couldn't help but think about how the conversation around ageing has shifted. We're no longer just asking "how long will I live?" but "how well will I live?" Andy represents a new generation of researchers who understand that the goal isn't just to treat disease—it's to help people maintain agency, productivity, and joy throughout their entire lifespan. Here are 4 reflections and one experiment to consider.

1. Cancer Is a Disease of Accumulated Mutation, Not Inevitability

Andy explained cancer in beautifully simple terms: imagine being forced to copy a massive document 1,000 times. You're bound to make errors. Our cells divide throughout our lives, rewriting DNA code each time, and errors accumulate. What transforms a healthy cell into a cancer cell isn't one catastrophic event—it's the gradual accumulation of copying errors over time. This reframing is crucial because it helps us understand that whilst we can't prevent all mutations, we can influence the rate at which they accumulate through lifestyle choices.

The conversation took an unexpected turn when we explored the paradox of modern medicine: cancer rates are rising, yet mortality rates are falling. We're living longer, which gives our cells more time to accumulate mutations, but we're also getting dramatically better at treating those cancers when they appear. It's a reminder that ageing isn't about fighting time—it's about equipping ourselves for the journey ahead.



2. Immunotherapy Represents Our Best Hope For Treating Cancer

The story of Emily Whitehead, the first CAR T-cell patient, illustrates why immunotherapy is revolutionary. Traditional treatments like chemotherapy and radiation work by poisoning or burning cancer cells, often damaging healthy tissue in the process. Immunotherapy takes a fundamentally different approach: it turns our own immune cells into what he called "super soldiers" that can recognise and destroy cancer cells with precision. What's extraordinary is that these engineered immune cells create memory—Emily Whitehead has been cancer-free for 13 years because her immune system now knows how to fight that particular cancer if it ever returns.

Going back to the metaphor that immune cells act as soldiers that are constantly patrolling our body, looking for threats. Unlike every other cell type—which stays in one place—immune cells are mobile, able to travel anywhere. They can learn about threats in your toe and then travel to your eye with that knowledge intact. This mobility and memory make them uniquely suited for fighting cancer, which can appear anywhere and spread throughout the body. The key is keeping our immune system functioning optimally as we age, because immune function naturally declines over time.

3. Stress May Actually Fuel Cancer Growth Through the Nervous System

Animal studies have shown that stress causes the body to produce neurotransmitters that can actually help cancer cells grow more effectively. The nervous system communicates extensively with skin cancer cells, and when animals are stressed, this communication appears to accelerate tumour growth. Whilst this hasn't been definitively proven in humans yet, it adds scientific weight to what many people instinctively feel: chronic stress isn't just unpleasant, it may be genuinely dangerous. This doesn't mean stress causes cancer, but it suggests stress management isn't just about quality of life—it may be about longevity itself.

This is perhaps the most empowering insight from our conversation. Whilst 20-30% of cancer risk is genetically determined by how we're born—a full 70% is associated with lifestyle factors. We know tobacco causes lung cancer. We know carcinogenic agents in preserved foods contribute to colon cancer. We know that microplastics are now found throughout our bodies and may be linked to chronic inflammation. The science gives us clear targets: avoid proven

carcinogens, maintain a balanced diet, exercise regularly, get adequate sleep. We're not helpless in the face of cancer; we have agency.

4. Balance Is the Ultimate Health Strategy

When I asked Andy about his personal health practices, he kept returning to one word: balance. Balanced sleep (eight hours), balanced exercise (three to four times weekly), balanced diet (including intermittent fasting). But balance isn't just about physical practices—it's about avoiding extremes in any direction. We've already "cracked the code" on healthy living, Andy argues. The challenge isn't knowing what to do; it's motivating ourselves to do it consistently. In a world of biohacking fads and extreme protocols, Andy's commitment to balance feels both refreshing and scientifically sound.

One Practical Experiment For Listeners

the Gratitude Mapping Experiment

After receiving Singapore's President's Science and Technology Award, Andy didn't immediately post about it on social media. Instead, he took time to identify every person who had contributed to his success—students, colleagues, mentors—and wrote each one a personalised message acknowledging their specific contribution before making any public announcement.

This week, I invite you to create your own gratitude map:

1. Choose one area of your life where you've experienced success, growth, or simply sustained wellbeing—your health, your work, a relationship, a creative pursuit, anything meaningful.

2. Take 15 minutes with a blank piece of paper. Draw yourself in the centre. Around you, map out every person who has contributed to this area of your life. Include the obvious people, but also the less obvious ones—the friend who listened during a difficult time, the colleague who covered for you, the family member who believed in you, even the person who challenged you in a way that ultimately helped you grow.

3. Over the next week, reach out to three of these people with a specific, personal message. Don't just say "thank you." Tell them exactly what they did and why it mattered. Name the specific moment, the specific insight, the specific support that made a difference.

Closing Reflection

What I took away from this conversation goes beyond the science, as remarkable as that science is. Andy embodies something we all need more of: the ability to be at the cutting edge of innovation whilst remaining grounded in timeless wisdom. He's engineering super-soldier immune cells in the laboratory and practising intermittent fasting at home. He's winning prestigious awards and taking time to thank everyone who helped him get there.

The message for those of us navigating midlife and beyond is clear: we live in an extraordinary moment. Medical science is giving us more options than ever before. But science alone won't save us. We need balance. We need personal responsibility. We need gratitude. And we need to start now, because the choices we make today are writing the story of how we'll age tomorrow.

Don't let the old man in—equip the wise person you're becoming.

DLTOMI is a podcast brought to you by Pod O'Sullivan, where he has real and candid conversations with experts, celebrities and ordinary men about navigating midlife. The ups, the downs, the surprises, the opportunities, the secrets and how to do it on your terms, gracefully or even disgracefully!

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