

Can Silicon Valley 'fix' the aging problem?

In Palo Alto in the heart of Silicon Valley, hedge fund manager Joon Yun is doing a back-of-the-envelope calculation. According to U.S. social security data, he says, the probability of a 25-year-old dying before their 26th birthday is 0.1 percent. If we could keep that risk constant throughout life instead of it rising due to age-related disease, the average person would – statistically speaking – live 1,000 years. Yun finds the prospect tantalising and even believable. Late last year he launched a \$1 m prize challenging scientists to “hack the code of life” and push human lifespan past its apparent maximum of about 120 years (the longest known/confirmed lifespan was 122 years).

Yun's quest – a modern version of the age old dream of tapping the fountain of youth – is emblematic of the current enthusiasm to disrupt death sweeping Silicon Valley. Billionaires and companies are bullish about what they can achieve. In September 2013 Google announced the creation of [Calico](#), short for the California Life Company. Its mission is to reverse engineer the biology that controls lifespan and “devise interventions that enable people to lead longer and healthier lives”. Though much mystery surrounds the new biotech company, it seems to be looking in part to develop age-defying drugs. In April 2014 it recruited [Cynthia Kenyon](#), a scientist acclaimed for work that included genetically engineering roundworms to live up to six times longer than normal, and who has spoken of dreaming of applying her discoveries to people. “Calico has the money to do almost anything it wants,” says Tom Johnson, an earlier pioneer of the field now at the University of Colorado who was the first to find a genetic effect on longevity in a worm.

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