Causes of Death in the Elderly
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Over time, there have been clear shifts in population demographics and in the leading causes of death. These changes are made most evident by the rapid growth of the elderly segment of our population. Shifts have occurred because of public health measures, economic development, better access to health care services and advances in medical technology. The first 3 of these reasons are primarily responsible for decreased mortality rates.

from acute causes of death such as infectious diseases. This leaves us with the “picture” we see today, where chronic diseases are the predominant causes of death in developed countries. Medical technology advances (diagnostic, preventive and treatment) explain changes in the proportionate impact of specific chronic diseases on mortality. In the future, these advances will help sustain the improvements in mortality that have already been realized.

This graphic, which appears in the comprehensive Chartbook on Trends in the Health of Americans, Health, United States, 2002, clearly illustrates cause of death trends in the over-65 segment of the US population.

The death rate for heart disease among the elderly declined between 1950 and 1999 by more than 50% and the death rate for stroke by more than 60%. Trends in the other leading causes of death among the elderly varied. The death rate for cancer, the second leading cause of death for the elderly in 1999, rose between 1950 and 1995 and has decreased slightly since 1995. The death rate for chronic lower respiratory diseases has increased since 1980, probably reflecting the effects of cigarette smoking. The decrease in the death rate due to influenza and pneumonia in the late 1990s, in part, reflects changes in coding of this cause of death.