

# Suit lets medical students experience symptoms of old age

The Age Man Suit, developed by German scientists, is designed to make future doctors aware of older people's needs



**Kate Connolly** in Berlin

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The Age Man Suit, which has ear-protectors that stifle hearing and a yellow visor that blurs eyesight.

It's nothing if not depressing. I drop a coin on the floor and bend down to pick it up. The bending is laborious and with it comes the risk of toppling over. My head is heavy and moving it causes dizziness. And there's still that coin to pick up – a five-cent piece, which, with my clumsy hands whose fingers are not very flexible and lacking a proper sense of touch – seems to defy my attempts to grab it, five, six times. Those around me joke: "Hurry up, grandma, we haven't got all day."

"Welcome to old age," says Rahel Eckardt, a senior physician at Berlin's Evangelical Geriatrics Centre (EGZB) who has just helped me climb into an industrial-style futuristic boiler suit, which should give the wearer the sense of what, it's like to be old.

Consisting of ear-protectors that stifle hearing, a yellow visor that blurs eyesight and makes it hard to distinguish colours, knee and elbow pads which stiffen the joints, a Kevlar-jacket-style vest which presses uncomfortably against my chest, and padded gloves, the Age Man Suit, which weighs around 10kg, has been custom-made to simulate the physical consequences of old age. I have not felt so encumbered since being nine-and-a-half months pregnant, or so claustrophobic since climbing into the cramped hiding place an Iraqi dissident had built beneath his kitchen.

A walk up the stairs leaves one breathless and tired, trying to remove tablets from a blister pack is a fumbling disaster, and the heaviness coupled with the stifled hearing and vision is distinctly disorienting.

This is exactly what Eckardt wants her students of medicine to experience.

"My aim is to turn young energetic people into slow, creaking beings, temporarily at least," she said. "That way they will I hope, develop a feeling for what it's like to be old."

Eckardt's aim is to sensitise a whole new generation of doctors to the medical and social needs of Germany's fastest-growing population group. She argues that there is a huge disconnect between large sections of the medical profession and their elderly patients, as well as a desperate lack of doctors willing to go into geriatric medicine.

"Rather than a PowerPoint presentation, this is the best way of giving them a real idea of what it's like to be old – that is, 75 and upwards – and only once we have their empathy can we really begin to win students round to becoming interested in old people as patients," she said. "Maybe then they will consider a career in geriatrics, which until now has fought for recognition alongside other fields of medicine that are considered to be more exciting."

The EGZB developed the suit together with the Saarbrücken-based **Meyer-Hentschel Institute**, which supports research into so-called "senior friendly" products for the over-60s. The institute has put the suit – also known as the age explorer – to use in other fields such as the household appliance and gastronomic industries. It hopes to sensitise a society that has done very little to prepare itself for a demographic time bomb that is more acute in Germany than almost anywhere else in the world, apart from Japan and Monaco. By 2030 more than 26% of the German population is expected to be over 65.

Elisabeth Steinhagen, 22, a second-year medical student at the EGZB, said her experience of the suit had contributed to her interest in the health of elderly people. "Geriatrics is a relatively new field, which doesn't have the status of other areas of medicine like surgery," she said. "But it involves a great variety of illnesses, not just arthritis and dementia, and so is a fascinating field." And with the demographic pyramid in Germany now top-heavy with older people, it is going to grow in importance.

"But if we're going to take it seriously, doctors need to develop social skills, like learning to speak louder and clearer, or to appreciate that things that are easy for us, like getting out of bed, are more difficult for older people. They might sound like basic things but it's amazing how many doctors don't think about them," she said.