

This man might live to 1,000

Aubrey De Grey
Is No Crank.
The Cambridge
PhD Knocked
IITians Dead
With His Talk
On Immortality
Research

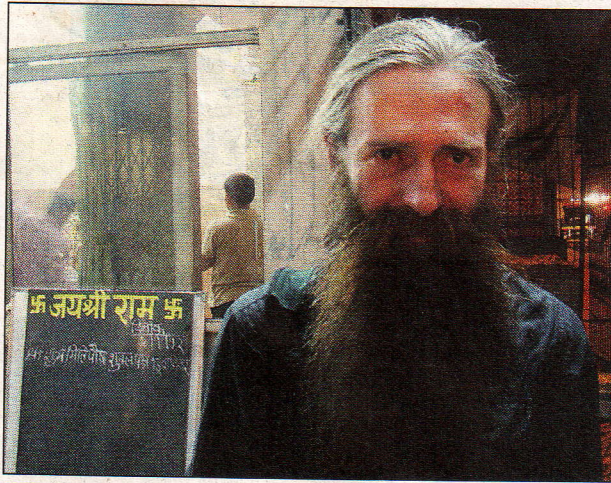
Agniva Banerjee | TNN

When he sees the PDF of this article, Aubrey de Grey will not like the headline. He will absolutely hate it, since he particularly instructed TOI not to give it. His suggestion, sorry, instruction, was: Longevity, a side effect of regenerative medicine.

"Here!" he shouted above the din of the bar a few metres from the IIT's main gate, shoving the pen back into the correspondent's hand. "Write that down... Yes, go on! Write that down," he said in a clipped Cambridge accent that had the hint of a lisp.

Clearly, newspaper headlines are not the strong point of de Grey, a scientist whose research has underlined the need to stop the ageing process in humans, a need that many have questioned, saying what will then be the meaning of being human.

He dismisses such philosophical questions as irrational and unscientific. "Age-



FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH: It is no coincidence that Aubrey De Grey resembles Grigori Rasputin. The atheist doesn't mind being 'immortal', like the mystic. If the science he pioneers makes him so, he would soak in the "1,000-year backlog of knowledge" he has accumulated in his 48 years

Ageing is the lifelong accumulation of molecular and cellular damage throughout the body

ing kills more people every day than any other thing. Yet we do not consider it a disease," he says, his piercing eyes trying to drill the point in. "People don't know about the science. People don't want to think about it. Ageing causes suffering, diseases... Alzheimer's, cancer... We intend to fix them."

The first person plural refers to biogerontologists—scientists who investigate the ageing process. Till four or five years ago, biogerontology, in particular de Grey's research, was not taken seriously by the scientific community. But now, many scientists, businesses and governments have start-

ed seeing sense in it. In 2002-03, De Grey says, he was ignored. In 2003-04, he was ridiculed. "But now I have tacit support. In 2006-08, people recognized I had won the battle. I am now waiting for the tacit support to become active. I am waiting for the people who ignored me to tell me 'we were always with you'."

"You know what? Everybody has been scared of ageing since the time of Gilgamesh. Still, you convince yourself that ageing is good, that it is inevitable, just because you cannot think of doing anything about it. But we must grow up and be rational about ageing."

What about overpopulation? What about ageing cure being accessible only to the rich? "Did you notice how amusing what you just said sounds? On one hand you are worried about overpopulation. On the other you are worried about ageing cure being a preserve of the elite. Aren't those mutually exclusive propositions?" he says in a burst of clarity. But the expression on his face is more of resignation than triumph.

"Most technologies take long to become cheap. It is the responsibility of governments to make them accessible to the majority. Also, governments will save on health budgets if they (subsidize) anti-ageing therapy."

It is difficult to find fault with de Grey's logic. More so when one realizes he is a man of razor sharp intellect. Consider this. He graduated in computer science from Cambridge in 1985, spending the next few years on AI research. He met his future wife, Adelaide Carpenter, in 1990, and the geneticist, 19 years his senior, taught him biology at the dinner table. In 2009, he co-founded the SENS Foundation (Strategies for Engineered Negligible Senescence Foundation) in California to further his research.

"There's a 50% chance anti-ageing cure will be found in my lifetime. But there is a 10% chance that it will not happen in the next 100 years," de Grey says with a scientist's caution. "I know, and I know that I don't know."