

Age and sex distribution of deaths. Since 1921 when the collection of vital statistics was first instituted, the mortality trend at all ages has been downward. However, the principal factor in lowering the general death rate has been the reduction in the mortality of infants and children.

Table 4.40 shows that between 1951 and 1972, death rates for infants and for young children under 10 years of age dropped by 50% or more. Rates for the 10-14 group also declined steeply. However, rates for boys and young men from 15 to 24 were actually slightly higher than in 1951. Death rates for males over 25 were appreciably lower in 1972 than in 1951, except for men in the 65-74 interval, where there was little change. On the other hand, rates for females of all ages declined very substantially over the period between 1951 and 1972.

As shown in Table 4.41 covering the 1961-71 period, males under 40 accounted for 18.1% of all male deaths in 1961 but for only 13.6% of such deaths in 1971; in 1961, 16.4% of all female deaths were of persons under 40, a percentage that declined to 10.7 in 1971.

The sharp reductions in male infant and child mortality, and the substantial declines in the female rates for all younger age groups, have tended to raise the average age at death. Over the 1961-71 period the average age at death for males rose 3.6 years from 59.7 to 63.3, with the average age for females advancing 5.1 years, from 63.1 to 68.2. In the same period, the male median age at death rose only slightly, from 67.9 to 68.5, but the gain for females was 2.5 years, from 72.2 to 74.7. Thus, half the females who died in 1971 were more than 74.7 years old.

Causes of death. Table 4.42 presents details of the 1972 Canadian deaths and death rates based on 50 causes as given in the International Abbreviated List (International Classification of Diseases, 8th Revision). Of the 162,413 deaths occurring in 1972, 79,781 or over 49% were due to cardiovascular diseases, i.e. to ailments of the heart and circulatory system. Cancer accounted for 32,265, or 19.9%, accidents for 12,825 or 7.9%, and respiratory ailments for 10,787 or 6.6%. Combined, these four causes were responsible for 135,658 deaths, or 83.5% of the total.

The proportion of older people in the population has been rising in recent years. Consequently, cancer and cardiovascular diseases account for a larger proportion of all deaths than formerly. On the other hand, deaths of infants, children and young adults from such diseases as pneumonia and tuberculosis have sharply declined.

Table 4.43 shows that the leading causes of infant mortality are radically different from the main causes of death at later periods. Accidents are the primary cause of death for males between one and 44 years of age. The majority of deaths among older males are due either to cardiovascular diseases or to cancer.

Accidents are also the primary cause of mortality among girls, with cancer being the leading cause of death of young and middle-aged women. Cardiovascular diseases and cancer, in that order, are the leading causes of death for elderly women.

4.7.2 Infant mortality

Table 4.44 shows that mortality rates for both male and female infants (under one year of age) have been reduced by more than half since 1951. For example, if the 1951 death rate had remained unchanged until 1972, there would have been 13,372 infant deaths in that year, rather than 5,938. The improvement is due to many factors including better prenatal and postnatal care, improved sanitation, the use of antibiotics and higher living standards. In recent years, also, older women (a high-risk group) have been having fewer babies.

The 1972 provincial mortality rates for infants of both sexes ranged from 15.3 for Ontario to 20.7 in the case of Newfoundland, with the rates for the territories being substantially higher. The national death rate for all infants was 17.1 the lowest on record, with all provinces but New Brunswick and Manitoba recording the lowest infant mortality rates in their history.

Table 4.44 shows that male infant mortality in Canada over the past couple of years was 20-25% higher than the corresponding female mortality. Of 1,000 infant boys born alive in Canada during 1972, 19 failed to reach their first birthday, whereas for every 1,000 girl infants born alive there were only 15 fatalities by the end of the first year. Thus, while about 1,060 males are born for every 1,000 females, the higher male infant mortality reduces the excess to some extent during the first year.

Ages of infant deaths. As shown in Table 4.45, 4,117 or over 69% of the 5,938 infants who died during 1972 within a year of their birth died during the first four weeks of life, which is