

SEEING  
THROUGH  
SNAKE OIL

By Allyson Rowley

.....  
*Forget Dr. Oz. The McMaster  
Optimal Aging Portal is the real  
deal – if you're looking for reliable,  
evidence-based health information  
for an aging population.*

**mcmasteroptimalaging.org**

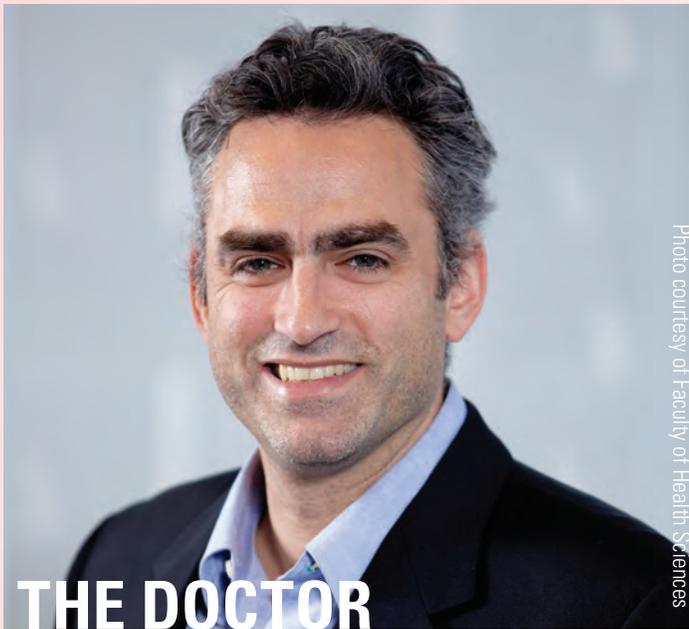


Photo courtesy of Faculty of Health Sciences

## THE DOCTOR

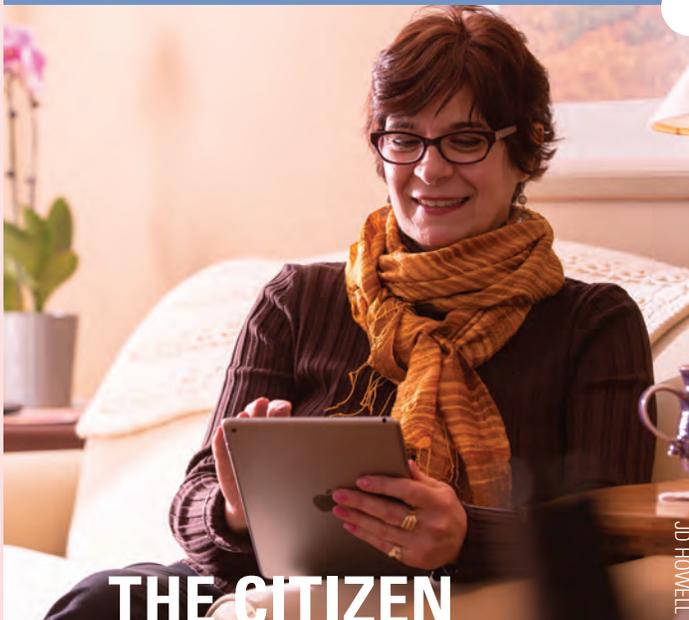
“With the McMaster Optimal Aging Portal, we’re constantly picking and choosing the best of the best to create consumer-friendly summaries of the evidence,” says Dr. Anthony Levinson of the Faculty of Health Sciences. “We’re thinking of the ‘prosumer’ – someone who takes an active role in his or her own health.” Levinson led the development of the website, which launched in October 2014.



Photo courtesy of Faculty of Health Sciences

## THE PHILANTHROPIST

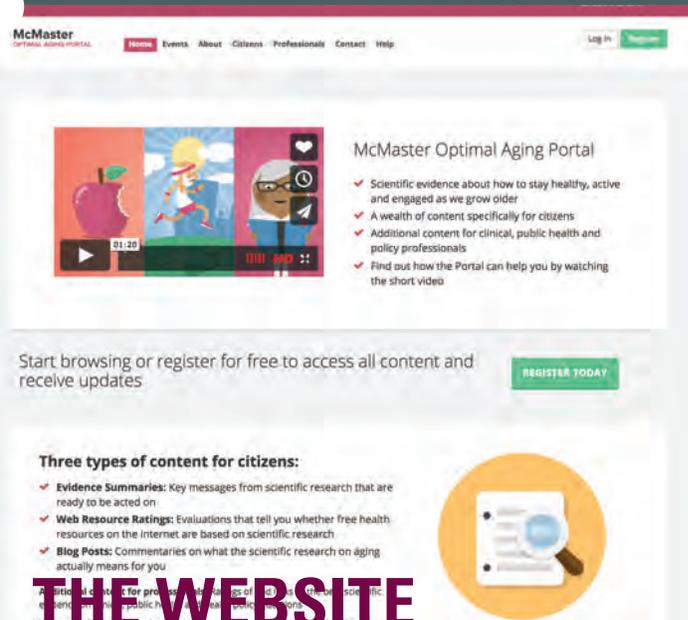
“There’s so much misleading information around and frankly a lot of people selling snake oil. You really want to know you’re doing the right thing for yourself,” says Suzanne Labarge. Part of her \$10-million gift to McMaster in 2012 provided seed funding to launch the McMaster Optimal Aging Portal, a trusted source of medical information now available to anyone with an internet connection.



JD HOWELL

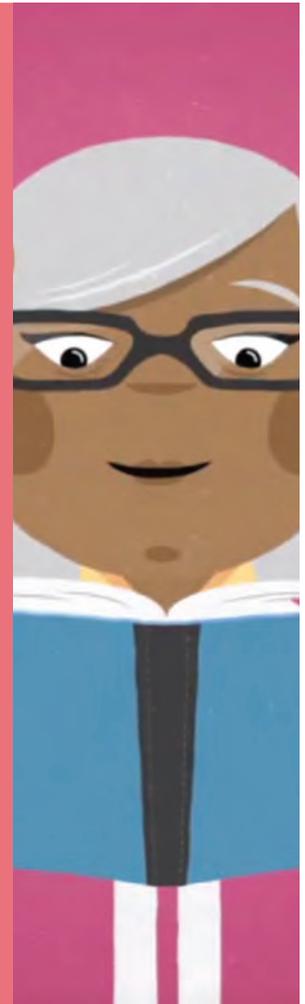
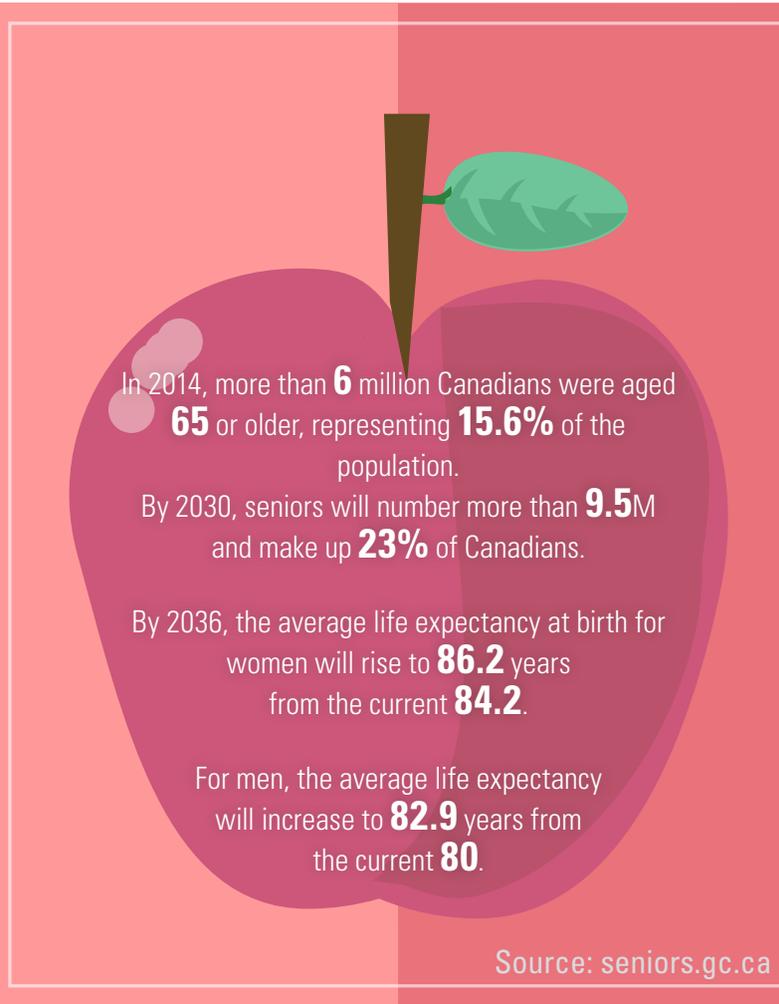
## THE CITIZEN

Tina Falbo checks the McMaster Optimal Aging Portal for questions she has about health and wellness, both for herself and her elderly parents. “For the average citizen, it’s a wonderful place to start,” she says. The website provides free, searchable, evidence-based information on optimal aging for seniors – and anyone else interested in living long and living well.



## THE WEBSITE

[mcmasteroptimalaging.org](http://mcmasteroptimalaging.org)



## mcmasteroptimalaging.org

It all started with dinner on Friday nights. “When we both lived in Ottawa in the 1980s, my mother and I would get together over a meal at the end of every week,” recalls **Suzanne Labarge '67**.

A renowned author and historian, Margaret Wade Labarge, CM was also a passionate advocate for the elderly, serving as chair of the Board of Governors of St. Vincent’s Hospital and chair of the Ottawa Council on Aging.

“It became part of my life for almost 10 years, understanding the issues around aging,” says Labarge of their weekly get-togethers. Her mother had taken over many of her father’s volunteer commitments when he had passed away. “It runs in the family,” says Labarge, whose father, **Raymond Labarge '36**, was a member of McMaster’s Board of Governors.

Appointed McMaster’s chancellor in 2013, Suzanne Labarge served in executive positions with the federal government and the Royal Bank until her retirement in 2004. “My parents believed that you are part of the community and you give back. And if you’ve been lucky, you give back more.”

And that she has done, in spades. In 2007, Labarge donated \$2 million to establish a research chair in optimal aging, named in tribute to her parents. Then in 2012, she gave a further \$10-million to her alma mater to launch the Labarge Optimal Aging Initiative. A key part of that multi-pronged initiative is the McMaster Optimal Aging Portal – a free website service for citizens, clinicians, public health professionals and policymakers alike. Launched in October 2014, its URL is [mcmasteroptimalaging.org](http://mcmasteroptimalaging.org).

**Anthony Levinson '97, '06** leads the website’s design, development and administration. “There are many online resources that deal with health and aging, but what sets the McMaster Optimal Aging Portal apart is our emphasis on providing the best evidence – and on telling you why it’s the best.”

“Here at McMaster, we have three world-renowned databases of health evidence, each meant for different audiences – public health professionals, clinicians and policymakers.”

The Portal team rates web resources, gathers evidence summaries and curates blog posts, helping you sort through the overwhelming amount of information available online.

“We hope we can become the sensible go-to place. Don’t just type your question into Google. Go to the Portal,” says Levinson, director of the Division of e-Learning Innovation in the Faculty of Health Sciences and the John R. Evans Chair in Health Sciences Educational Research and Instructional Development.

Three databases form the scientific backbone to the new website. “It was serendipity,” says Levinson. “Here at McMaster, we have three

world-renowned databases of health evidence, each meant for different audiences – public health professionals, clinicians and policymakers.” The Portal taps into that deep pool of knowledge and makes it accessible and understandable to the general public.

Along with Levinson, the leadership team for the McMaster Optimal Aging Portal includes **Maureen Dobbins '89**, **Brian Haynes '73, '76**, John Lavis and Parminder Raina (see the sidebar “Meet the expert leaders”).

## “The Portal empowers patients to take care of their own health”

After the successful launch this fall, the next phase will focus on promoting the Portal to partner organizations, as well as undertaking further evaluation. “We want it to be useful and impactful,” says Levinson, who encourages members of the community to participate in the evaluation process.

**Tina Falbo '80** was one of the citizens who took part in the six-month testing process that led up to the October launch. She reviewed the blogs: Were they easy to understand and clearly communicated? Were

the topics useful and was there enough supporting evidence? “I was quite impressed. The information is very high-quality.”

Falbo notes the Portal is relevant not only for seniors, but also for caregivers and anyone interested in healthy aging. “They have gathered the best of the best,” says Falbo, a retired teacher who helps care for her elderly parents.

She’s also one of the volunteers in a Healthy Aging course offered by the Faculty of Social Sciences. “We challenge the students’ assumptions and extend their thinking about older people,” says Falbo, who often recommends students check out the Portal for themselves.

Family physician **Doug Oliver '98, '01, '03** is also quick to debunk a few myths. The usual thinking is that the elderly aren’t computer literate – so how can a website help them? Not so fast. “My older patients are happy to use technology and are more computer literate than we give them credit for.”

The Portal empowers patients to take care of their own health, says Oliver. “From a family physician’s point of view, the more knowledge the patient has, the better his or her health will be.”

Thanks to Suzanne Labarge’s extraordinary generosity, the website’s initial seven years have been kick-started. She envisions the Portal as a unique resource for McMaster to continue building its reputation as an optimal aging powerhouse – and to continue generating research



The leadership team of the McMaster Optimal Aging Portal, from left to right:

**Anthony J. Levinson, MD, MSc, FRCPC**

Physician; Associate Professor, Psychiatry and Behavioural Neurosciences; Director, Division of e-Learning Innovation and machealth; John R. Evans Chair in Health Sciences Educational Research and Instructional Development.

**John Lavis, MD, PhD**

Physician; Professor, Clinical Epidemiology and Biostatistics; Director of the McMaster Health Forum.

**Maureen Dobbins, BScN, PhD**

Professor, School of Nursing; Scientific Director, National Collaborating Centre for Methods and Tools, McMaster University.

**Parminder Raina, BSc, PhD**

Professor, Clinical Epidemiology and Biostatistics; Raymond and Margaret Labarge Chair in Research and Knowledge Application for Optimal Aging; Canada Research Chair in GeroScience.

**Brian Haynes, MD, PhD, FRCPC**

Physician; Professor, Clinical Epidemiology and Medicine; Director of McMasterPLUS™; and Health Information Research Unit, McMaster University.

“The Portal team helps you sort through the overwhelming amount of information available online.”

collaborations along with sustainable funding, free of commercial sponsorship. There’s also a “donate” button on each page for anyone who’d like to contribute.

“It’s amazing what the team has done in two years. We’ve come so far in so short a time,” says Labarge, who notes McMaster’s stellar reputation in the health sciences, as well as its thriving culture of interdisciplinary collaboration.”

“That’s the advantage at McMaster – we have top-notch, world-class people here. We’re going to make it work.” ■

To learn more, visit [mcmasteroptimalaging.org](http://mcmasteroptimalaging.org) or email [info@mcmasteroptimalaging.org](mailto:info@mcmasteroptimalaging.org)



**L. Ruth Simmons '82** volunteers for Healthy Aging 1BB3, a course offered in the Department of Health, Aging and Society. “The McMaster Optimal Aging Portal will certainly be a great source of information,” says Simmons, who uses her computer every day to stay in touch with her far-flung children and grandchildren.

# Would you trust your health to Dr. **Google** ?

## Rx PRESCRIPTION

Here’s what the McMaster Optimal Aging Portal offers instead...



**Evidence Summaries:** Articles with plain-language summaries of systematic reviews of research evidence, written for citizens.



**Web Resource Ratings:** These tell you whether free health resources on the internet are based on scientific research.



**Blog Posts:** Commentaries on what the scientific research actually means – and why good science matters.