The dark side of the booming business of trying to live forever

Anti-ageing will soon explode into a $1.8 trillion industry as the rich chase immortality. But do we truly think we can defeat death itself?

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Charlton Heston died in 2008 but his film legacy lives on, including the 1973 movie Soylent Green, questioning the planet's future if we all live longer. Sources: iStock and Supplied. Artwork: Frank Ling

If you're one of those people who plan to live forever and you happen to be in London over the next few months, you might want to pop into the latest exhibit at the Wellcome Collection on Euston Rd in central London.

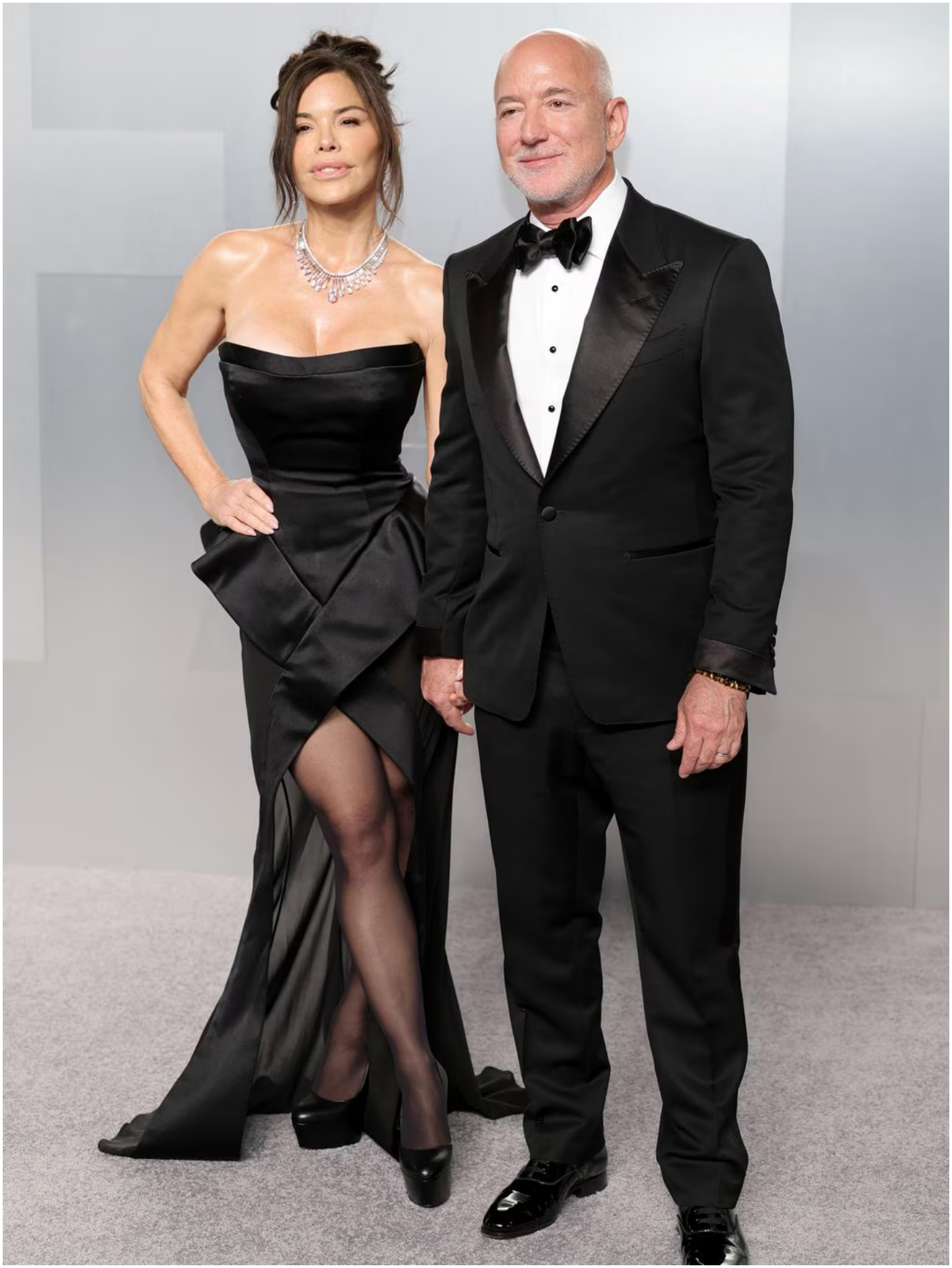
The show, The Coming of Age, is an uber-timely look at our species' perennial desire to, well, cheat death.

"Across the globe, people are living longer," the exhibition literature proclaims. "One in 10 children in the UK are expected to live beyond the age of 100. But who gets to live longer and 'age well'?"

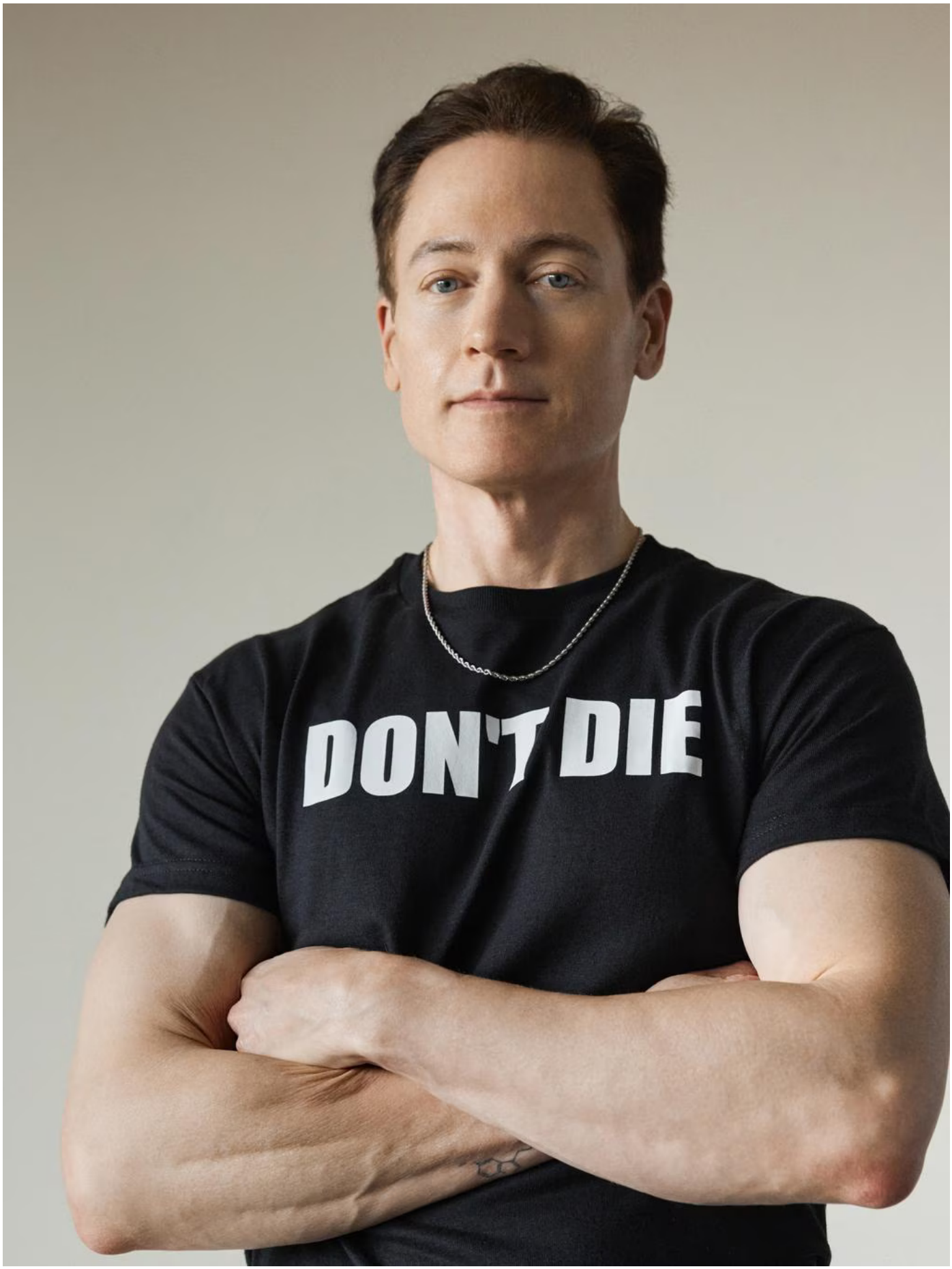
And if you're passing through West Palm Beach in Florida this weekend you can pay a visit to the Longevity SpringFest 2026, a gathering of global experts on how to live vibrantly way, way, way beyond your standard years, enabled by longevity and anti-senescence therapies.

"Senescence" – or the process of growing old courtesy of the gradual deterioration of human cells and organisms – is the buzz word in the wellness world.

In the booming "live forever" industry, it is what the crucifix is to vampires. Or silver is to werewolves. Senescence must be overcome, conquered, eradicated.



Lauren Sanchez and Jeff Bezos attend the 2026 Vanity Fair Oscar party in Los Angeles in March. Picture: Getty Images



American entrepreneur and venture capitalist Bryan Johnson.

Anti-ageing is now a multibillion-dollar industry expected to have a market worth $1.8 trillion by 2034. Anti-senescence therapy and a brace of new scientific terms and lingo once the province of science-fiction have now entered the wellness mainstream.

Everyone, it seems, wants to live forever.

As the New York Post wrote late last month: "In a world of $160,000 'human optimisation devices', $10,000-per-week wellness retreats and $22 collagen smoothies at upscale LA grocery store Erewhon, longevity has become not just a goal but a wealth-coded aesthetic. It is the Erewhon-ification of healthcare: Medicine is folded into the lifestyle economy, and access and image matter equally as much as the outcomes.

"That's made it big business – and more and more companies are making pricey treatments, tests and tools increasingly more accessible to the masses."

The longevity moment is being helped along by super-rich people who seem to think it might be possible to buy your way out of death, or at the very least keep it at bay for substantial periods once considered scientifically impossible.

Amazon supremo Jeff Bezos, the third-richest person in the world, has invested heavily in an institution called Alto Labs, which focuses on cellular rejuvenation and reprogramming. What if you could reset human cells to a younger biological state?

Voila, no walkers and adult nappies for you.



Black Sabbath at the height of their '70s fame.



Former Black Sabbath singer Ozzy Osbourne on the road to Hell in 1997. Osbourne died in 2025.

This obsession, long fantasised about by philosophers and poets and songwriters (from Oasis to Black Sabbath to Lil Peep), has been given a non-medical title – Longevity Fixation Syndrome – coined by Jan Gerber, founder of Paracelsus Recovery, a mental health rehabilitation clinic in Switzerland.

A recent article in The Guardian examined the trend and the often extreme lengths people will go to in order to avoid going quietly into that good night.

"At the extreme end of the spectrum, there is also a significant tribe of uber-rich tech bros seemingly intent on actual immortality," The Guardian wrote. "The poster boy for this is Bryan Johnson, 48, the American venture capitalist who … likes to wear a T-shirt reading 'Don't Die'. He has been infused with his son's youthful plasma (although later admitted this didn't show benefits) and is building an algorithm around his biomarker scores. 'I'm going to try and achieve immortality by 2039,' he has said.

"Whether the bio-hacks carry positive benefits for longevity or not is still up for debate; what seems clearer is the mental health fallout for those trying to live forever."

Indeed, mental health professionals are now seeing negative side-effects to the "longevity culture" and "superhero syndrome". It seems trying to live forever is not for the faint-hearted.

Where there's money, however, people will follow.

Big Pharma companies around the world have jumped on board and are now introducing "ageing departments" and "regenerative medicine" divisions.

Clarivate, the global data and analytics company, recently said: "Longevity – once dismissed as the domain of futurists and fringe scientists – has rapidly emerged as one of the most compelling frontiers in drug development. The transformation hasn't happened overnight but, since 2024, a convergence of scientific breakthroughs, regulatory evolution and unprecedented commercial interest has propelled ageing biology from academic curiosity to boardroom strategy.

"The next five years will determine whether ageing biology fulfils its promise as a new therapeutic paradigm. But the groundwork laid since 2024 suggests we're witnessing not just another biotech trend, but a fundamental reorientation of how medicine approaches health, disease and the human lifespan itself.

"The question is no longer whether longevity will become a major biopharma focus – it already has. The question now is which approaches will reach patients first, and how quickly the field can deliver on the extraordinary promise that has captured the attention and capital of an entire industry."



A drawing of Thomas Parr, who is said to have lived for almost 153 years.

Rafts of scientific studies have already accompanied the promise of a financial gold rush, looking at everything from resetting your genes, reversing cellular deterioration, tapping the possibility that the human body has a "backup file of youth", jump-starting cognitive decline, and removing dead or "zombie" cells from your system to ignite and improve later life health prospects.

In her review of the London Wellcome Collection exhibition, Rosa Lyster, of The New York Times, wrote that humans had never stopped trying to squeeze more out of the lemon of life.

"In the first room of (the) exhibition … a series of 13 portraits depicts incredibly, unbelievably old people," the review said. "An engraving from 1635, titled 'The Old, Old, Very Olde Man', shows Thomas Parr, a sly-looking figure who claimed to be 152 at the time of his death, and whose implausible longevity was still being invoked in ads for anti-ageing pills in the 1890s. Another engraving depicts a 19th-century couple, John and Sarah Rovin, who both look fantastic for their alleged ages (172 and 164). Though somewhat wrinkled and stooped, they are still on the move and wearing the same crafty, gloating expression as Parr.

"Almost all of the reputedly ancient figures in the portraits had this air about them, as if they'd pulled off some sort of heist."

Perhaps the joke, the con, the heist is on us.

What if we could live for 150 years and beyond?



The masses line up for supplies in a still from the classic movie Soylent Green.



Charlton Heston starred in the 1973 cult film Soylent Green, set in 2022.

The global population would explode.

Forget retirement. Most of us would still be toiling away into our early 100s on maybe our fourth, fifth or sixth careers.

The billionaires would still rule the world but they'd have more than enough time to all become trillionaires, zillionaires, and consolidate their dominance.

You'd have an almost endless "middle-age" period, which for certain men could mean decades of ongoing crises.

You could feasibly celebrate your 100th wedding anniversary (what would be the symbol? Forget silver or diamonds. It'd have to be Edvard Munch's The Scream image, wouldn't it?)

One lazy Sunday afternoon recently I stumbled across the classic 1973 Charlton Heston film Soylent Green. Set in 2022 (although everybody still seems to have huge box-like American Cadillacs and huge box-like television sets and wear flared pants and sport impressive mutton-chop sideburns), the world is monstrously overpopulated, the environment stuffed, and the wealthy the only ones rich enough to buy real food – a limp lettuce leaf, a skerrick of beef.

The rest have nothing to eat but dog biscuit-style plankton produced by the powerful Soylent Corporation.

If you've had enough and you want to check out, Soylent provides euthanasia clinics. No more choking pollution. No more water rations.

Here lies the lesson for the longevity dreamers.

Detective Robert Thorn (Heston) discovers that the Soylent munchies keeping a groaning planet alive are in fact made of dead bodies straight out of the end-of-life clinics. In other words – Cannibal Cookies.

Good, solid protein, but not particularly palatable if the Soylent Green delicacies are your Aunty Mabel or your next-door neighbour.