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Change in society's attitude helps lengthen lives

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People with developmental disabilities are living longer for a number of reasons.

Advances in medicine and technology have helped. General improvements in public health are also a factor.

But part of the reason has to do with a shift in attitude, according to Kathleen Watson, of the University of Washington's Center on Human Development and Disability.

It used to be that many people with developmental disabilities lived their whole lives in institutions, where communicable diseases such as tuberculosis could sometimes be a problem. Institutions began falling out of favor in the 1970s and 1980s. In Washington, institutional populations have declined for about 15 years.

Another attitudinal shift has to do with medical care. Years ago, people with developmental disabilities did not always receive the kind of medical care others did.

"They weren't treated the same way," Watson said.

Children born with Down syndrome, for example, often had heart defects, but doctors were sometimes reluctant to operate. Women with disabilities were less likely to get mammograms.

Today, although the situation is far from perfect, people with disabilities are more likely to get the same medical care as everyone else.