



Winning longevity marathon

By **JANELLE MILES**

AN AMERICAN expert on centenarians believes menstruation may play a part in why women are almost six times as likely to live to 100 than men.

In a personal attempt to live longer, Thomas Perls, director of the New England Centenarian Study, donates more than half a litre of blood every two months to mimic menstruation and hopefully, slow the ageing process.

Dr Perls told the International Healthy Ageing and Longevity Conference in Brisbane yesterday more than 85% of centenarians were women.

"Women are clearly the winners of the longevity marathon," he said.

While some scientists believe oestrogen plays a protective role in women, Dr Perls said another theory was that menstruation, causing iron deficiency over a large part of a woman's life, was a factor.

"Iron is a critical factor in our cell's ability to produce those nasty molecules called free radicals that play an important role in ageing," Dr Perls said outside the conference.

"It may be as simple as having less iron in your body makes you age more slowly and less susceptible to age-related diseases where free radicals play an important role.

"I menstruate but only every eight weeks. I do that by donating a pint of blood to the hospital.

"A little bit of that is altruism but I'm also actually seriously trying to

make myself iron deficient."

Dr Perls, who also avoids eating red meat, said donating blood was still being scientifically studied to see whether it had any effect on the ageing process in men.

While almost all of the men who reach 100 are married, Dr Perls said about one in five centenarian women had never been brides.

"An unusual proportion of the centenarian women, about 17%, were never married compared to other women born around the same time," he said.

"It tells us that perhaps men aren't such a great thing for women. But men always need women around.

"I know I'll be very unpopular in saying that around my male brethren but it's kind of interesting.

"For a woman never to have been married it selects out a group of women who may be more assertive and independent and these kind of psychological features are perhaps more conducive to living to extreme old age.

"We went and asked some of these women why they never married. Was it because they didn't have the opportunity?

"All of them had the opportunity to get married and it wasn't because they were lesbian. Many of them said they had plans and goals for their lives and there just wasn't the room for a man."

Dr Perls, an assistant professor of medicine at Boston University, interviewed four of Australia's 3000 centenarians on stage at the conference.