



PATH Through Life Newsletter December 2002

In March this year we finished interviewing our 60 to 64 year old participants. We now have, in total, 7,485 participants in the PATH project. You will notice that we have not written individually in each card this year. Unfortunately, we do not have the resources to do this. However, we do appreciate the effort each one of you has taken in being part of our study.

Next year, starting in March, we will be trying to contact and reinterview all of our participants from our 20+ age group. We know that many of you will have moved, changed names, mobile numbers or email addresses. While we would ask all participants to complete and return the bright pink cards included with this, *we particularly need the 20+ group to do this*.

This year those of us involved in the PATH project have been busy preparing for next year. There will be some extra questions; however, we will be using bigger and better computers to complete the interview this time and these will make it quicker to go through the interview.

Now that we have data on three age groups, many of us have been involved in analysing the data, preparing reports for publication and presenting results at scientific conferences.

Analysis of data in 2002

At this time, 3 articles have been published in scientific journals. The first of these is by Tanya Caldwell and looks at the relationship between alcohol consumption and depression symptoms in the 20+ sample. She found that for both men and women, those who drink harmful levels of alcohol are more depressed while for men, those who drink only occasionally or not at all have higher levels of depression than those who drink moderately. However, those who drank little or not at all were more introverted and more likely to have health problems. So, don't think that it is the lack of alcohol, which is making these people more depressed!

In another published paper, Tony Jorm examined sexual orientation and mental health in all three age groups. He found that those who were bisexual reported the highest levels of anxiety and depression, homosexuals the next highest, and heterosexuals, the lowest levels.

Ruth Parslow has had an article published which looks at factors associated with visits to the doctors in the 20+ age group. She found that those visiting the doctor were more likely to be women, to have done higher education, to have more suicidal thoughts and to use marijuana more regularly. She concluded that it is important for doctors to be aware that patients in this age may come with physical problems but may also have mental health or substance use problems.

As well as those articles that have been published, 8 have been sent to journals while a number of others are currently being written. Details of the papers that have been published can be found on our web site www.anu.edu.au/cmhr which is regularly updated.

Conferences

In the first week of December, 2002 CMHR is hosting the annual conference of the Australasian Society for Psychiatric Research (ASPR) at ANU. A number of people from CMHR will be giving talks on PATH at this conference.

Kaarin Anstey will talk about symptoms of depression and anxiety in PATH people who have reported head injuries. She found that those who had had a head injury reported higher levels of

depression and anxiety and that emotional as well as physical problems were more likely to be currently affecting their life even if the head injury had occurred a long time ago.

Tony Jorm will be speaking at ASPR on the association of being overweight with anxiety, depression and emotional well-being. Women (but not men) who were overweight were found to have higher levels of anxiety and depression and to have lower well-being. This association could be explained in terms of poorer physical health in those who were overweight. So, losing weight may not directly improve one's well-being, unless a person's physical health improves as well.

Stephen Rosenman has been looking at the frequency with which participants report family problems and mistreatment as children and he will speak about this at ASPR. It is known that such problems have consequences in later life. However, most information comes from people who are having treatment for emotional problems. It is important to look at the effect of such childhood problems in a large community sample which includes those who have never sought help. Dr Rosenman found that 60% of participants reported at least one problem with those aged 40-44 reporting the most. People were more likely to report sexual abuse if their fathers had problems with alcohol or drugs or suffered from an emotional problem. Where mothers had these problems, parents were more likely to have divorced and participants were more likely to report poverty, neglect and physical and mental cruelty. Further analyses will examine the relationship between these childhood problems with emotional problems as adults.

The 60+ substudies

As part of the 60+ study we ran 2 smaller studies. One study asked 500 PATH participants if they would be willing to have a brain Magnetic Resonance Image (MRI) and to give some blood. The purpose of this study is to investigate how the brain changes as people get older. Results of the MRI scan will be compared with information collected from the PATH interview. This is the biggest study of its type to be undertaken in Australia. One of the first things to be analysed in these data is the size of various brain structures. This involves tracing around the edge of the brain and using special mathematical formula to determine the total size. So far, 150 brains have had the "hippocampus" measured. This part of the brain is thought to be involved in processing new memories. Another way the brains are being looked at is to look for changes in 2 different brain substances, the "white matter" and the "grey matter". When these measurements have been made comparisons will be made with the data collected from the main PATH interview.

In our other sub study we selected 150 participants to undergo a series of physical and psychological tests to enable a more in depth examination of memory and its association with physical health. The data from this study are currently being analysed.