



2008 Newsletter

Contact Information

Email: karen.maxwell@anu.edu.au

Phone: Karen on 02 6125 8417 or Trish on 02 6125 8408

Mail: The PATH Through Life Project
Centre for Mental Health Research
Australian National University ACT 0200

Progress in 2008 and Plans for 2009

In March of this year we completed interviewing the 20+ age group for the third time. 1978 participants were interviewed which is 82% of those interviewed at Wave 1 and 93% of those interviewed at Wave 2. We even managed to catch up with 60 participants from Wave 1 who were not able to participate at Wave 2. The third round of interviewing of our 40+ age group commenced in April of this year and is progressing well. Those in this age group who took part in the extra brain MRI sub-study at Wave 2 have been invited to have both a brain MRI and a cardiovascular assessment being undertaken by Dr Walter Abhayaratna, a cardiologist at The Canberra Hospital.

We hope to commence interviewing our 60+ age group in late April next year. Again, we will be undertaking the brain MRI and the Health and Memory sub-studies.

PATH Web Pages

In the last newsletter we promised that the website would be updated more frequently this year. Unfortunately, this has not happened. However, we are in the process of completely redesigning the website and hopefully, this will be online by the time you receive this newsletter. The updated site will have a page specifically for PATH participants. This will include office contact details for changes of address and any comments you may wish to make, average results for each Wave and age group for the physical testing and answers to some Frequently Asked Questions. We would appreciate feedback on the new site, by any of the contact methods outlined above.

The 2008 PATH Conference

In October this year, CMHR held a conference for all researchers working on PATH data. We had a very interesting day in which results were presented on a wide range of topics, including reports on the effect of pregnancy on cognition, cerebrovascular risk factors and depression, and what makes men and women anxious. There was considerable media interest in Dr Tim Windsor's work on volunteering and mental health (see under 'Research Highlights').

Some Research Highlights

Volunteering and Mental Health

Dr Tim Windsor examined results from the 60+ Wave 2 data and found that those engaged in moderate amounts of volunteering reported more positive emotions and greater satisfaction with life relative to those who did not take part in any voluntary activity. However, on average, higher levels of wellbeing were not evident among those who reported taking part in around 15 hours or more per week of voluntary activity. These results were recently published in *The Gerontologist*.

According to Dr Windsor, the results suggest that volunteering in retirement might not only contribute broadly and positively to the community, but might also add to the mental health and happiness of those who volunteer. However, this research also indicates that older volunteers need to take care to not become overburdened. "Adequate government and community support of the volunteer sector is

important to ensure that the burden of responsibility doesn't fall on just a few, but is shared by many" said Dr Windsor.

Subtle changes in brain white matter are already present when you are in your 40s

The brains of older individuals often show subtle changes in the 'white matter' (called 'white matter lesions'), which have become of increasing interest with the wide availability of MRI scans. It is thought that these changes are due to a gradual increase in abnormalities in small blood vessels of the brain as we age. Previous work done in the PATH Project has shown that more than 90% of otherwise healthy individuals in their early 60s have some of these changes on MRI. Even though subtle, they are related to mild slowing of movement and the speed of information processing in the brain.

In our 40+ MRI participants small white matter lesions were seen in 1 in 2 individuals. They were slightly more common in women. The lesions were not associated with any problems in cognitive or motor function which we think may be due to the fact that they were quite small and the brain has enough reserve capacity to overcome any problems they might be causing.

What was interesting was that individuals with these white matter lesions were more likely to be current smokers or heavy users of alcohol. While they are not associated with motor or cognitive function in this age group, the data suggest that interventions to prevent these changes should begin early in life. This is one area of preventative medicine that is likely to pay dividends in protecting our brains as we grow older.

Memory and Ageing in Context

A number of participants in our oldest age group have expressed their concern at being asked to do memory and concentration tasks that they believe they will perform more poorly as they get older. This is not necessarily the case. On average, the scores on these tasks are lower with older age groups but there is a large variation between individuals. Many people's memories hardly change throughout their lives while some even improve. Also, research suggests that other factors, besides ageing, affect memory performance. These factors include exercise, health, social networks and even one's belief in one's ability. Analysis of PATH data has found that people who feel more in control of their lives perform better at memory and concentration tasks and this better performance makes them feel more in control. So don't be worried by these tasks. You are probably doing better than you think. Also, the information we gain from this testing help us to determine ways in which we can retain or improve our memory as we age.

In Wave 3 we have included measures of both resilience and the ability to cope with stressful events. We believe that older people may have better skills than younger ages on these measures.

Focus Groups

In January of this year we held a focus group for interested participants from the 40+ age group. In January 2009 we will be offering meetings for 60+ participants who are interested in giving us some feedback on the PATH Project. If anyone in this age group would like to take part please contact us (see contact details above). The first 20 to do this will be able to take part in these meetings. Following feedback from the 40+ group we will send those who are interested in attending the meeting a copy of the last questionnaire to remind you of the contents. Dates for these meetings have not yet been finalised. Please note that the PATH office will be closed from 24th December to 5th January.

10 Years of PATH

Next year we hope to celebrate the first ten years of the PATH Project. Nothing specific has been planned at this stage but we would like to invite a small number of PATH participants to attend. If you are interested in being part of this please let us know. As with the focus groups, people will be selected in the order they contact us. As we will be inviting media to this event, we would ask that you only request to come if you are happy to be identified as being a participant in the Project.