

NEWSLETTER OF THE STRESS & HEALTH STUDY

Department of Epidemiology and Public Health, University College London Medical School
1-19 Torrington Place, London WC1E 6BT



Conducted by University College London Medical School in collaboration with OHSA

Dear Participant

Please keep in touch!

Thank you so much for participating in the Stress & Health study which is now in its eleventh year. We are extremely grateful to all of you who have given us a wealth of information on so many aspects of your life. We are particularly grateful to you for filling in the Phase 4 questionnaire and returning it to us.

These have nearly all been returned and we are currently analysing the information given. When the study started in 1985, the emphasis had been on the causes of coronary heart disease, and this continues to play a major part in the study. The study was also designed to shed light on other areas such as the effects on health of changes at work and how people manage the change from work into retirement.

The purpose of this newsletter is to give you some of the latest results of the study. It also shows how the information you have given in the past continues to be of relevance to the study today.

Michael Kummit

A most important aspect of the study is keeping in contact with all of you even if you have retired, moved away or left the Civil Service. We are still interested in you as an original participant in the study - so please keep in contact with us regardless of any change(s) you have experienced.

We should be very grateful if you would use the enclosed change of address card if this is applicable.



The Stress & Health Study Room

We would like to thank the following departments, agencies and non-departmental public bodies (NDPB) who have made this study possible.

Participating departments: British Library; British Museum; Cabinet Office; Central Office of Information; Council of Civil Service Unions; Customs and Excise; Department for Education and Employment; Department of the Environment; Department of Health; Department of Social Security; Department of Trade & Industry; Department of Transport; Government Actuary's Department; Home Office; Land Registry; Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food; Ministry of Defence; National Audit Office and the former Property Services and Training Agencies.

The first two articles are summaries of the study's investigations into changes in work and security of employment on health.

Does change at work affect your health?

One of the reasons the Civil Service was chosen as a subject for the Stress & Health study was because of its stability and relatively unchanging nature. However, over the last few years there have been radical changes in the Civil Service, which have been a surprise both to those conducting the study and Civil Servants themselves.

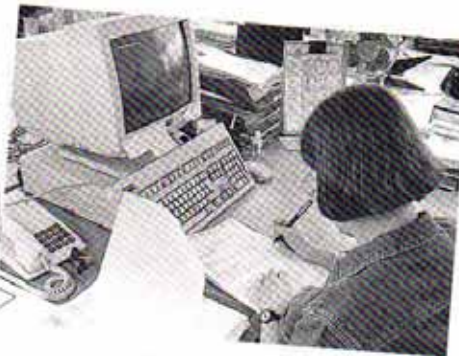
This has enabled the study to conduct important new research, as it is very rare to have detailed health records for people both before and after they undergo a period of change at work. The study has therefore a unique oppor-

tunity to observe the effects on health of people whose jobs were threatened or who were made redundant. This led us to ask in Phase 3 whether change of your department to an agency' (i) has happened, (ii) is expected, or (iii) not planned.

The study found that the health of those not expecting change compared favourably with those who had experienced or who were expecting to experience change, and this finding was consistent for health measures reported in the questionnaire and those taken during the medical examination.



When your questionnaire arrives at our office ...



first of all, it is checked ...

New views from interviews

More detailed research in this area has been carried out by Jane Ferrie and Ann Gosling. They have been examining the effects of privatisation on participants who were employed by the Property Services Agency (PSA) at the start of the Stress & Health Study. There were 666 of them who were each sent a questionnaire in 1994. Although 70% of them had left the Civil Service, 541 (82%) replied.

Their replies gave us important information, but as we felt the experiences and effects of changing jobs, being without work or adjusting to early retirement or

redundancy were too complex for a questionnaire, we decided to interview 109 ex-PSA staff and 28 of their relatives or friends. This is the first time face to face interviews had been included in the study, and it is providing a valuable further dimension to our work. Jane Ferrie and Ann Gosling would like to thank all those who made the interviews such an enjoyable and informative experience. They are now analysing data from both the questionnaires and the interviews, and their results will shed light on the effects of job insecurity, job change, work history and job loss on health.

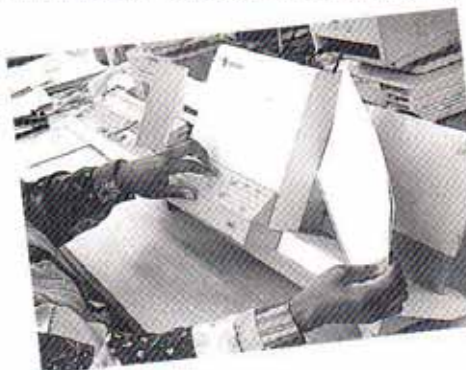
The study has expanded to examine the effects of retirement, as well as planning the next medical screening and health survey questionnaire.

About retirement ...

As the PSA study has revealed new information about redundancy and unemployment, the Stress & Health study has been able to begin investigating the effects on health of a different change in lifestyle - the effects of retirement. Not only is everyone (including us) getting older but some of you are reaching retirement age and so the study has now been extended to include retirement. The Retirement study has now been going for a year and is examining how people manage the change from work into retirement; by doing this we can obtain information and

advice, which could help other people retiring in the future. Again, because the Stress & Health study is in the prime position of having 10 years' details on its participants' health, it can relate this information to the retirement process. This makes our Retirement study unique.

Gill Mein co-ordinates the Retirement study and she will be contacting some of you who are in that "special" age range.



then scanned ...



and filed! Then we start work ...

Study enters Phase 5

As the study is a long term research project, the next phase is now being planned, and will include a further postal questionnaire and medical examination. The questionnaire will bring the study up to date with changes in your employment status as well as state of health, and there are some new questions about social life and lifestyle and their relationship to health. The medical screenings will commence early next year and take place in Central London as well as various locations throughout the United Kingdom, as many participants have now moved out of the London area.

Keeping in touch with participants and maintaining long term records is becoming more and more important for the study and we are looking forward to being in touch with you early next year and meeting you at the screenings. You are participating in a study unparalleled in population research. The results of the study are intended to have an impact in the workplace and to influence scientific and policy making arenas. Since the previous newsletter, over 15 scientific papers of the results of the study have been published in distinguished journals such as the British Medical Journal, and the study has also received considerable media interest from both newspapers and health programme documentaries.

Access to hospital notes

You may have noticed that when you filled in your Phase 4 questionnaire, sent out in the summer of 1995, there were some new questions about hospital visits and tests for heart disease and we also asked for your permission to contact hospitals to look at your records. You might be wondering why we need to use information from hospital notes in the Stress & Health study.

Many scientists and doctors all over the world study the causes of heart disease and they have to work to inter-

nationally recognised definitions to ensure consistency and accuracy in published work. The study employs a research nurse who visits the hospitals and records the information we need - mainly details of symptoms, blood test results, photocopies of heart tracing and other tests.

All the potential cases which are anonymised, are then presented to a panel of experts to decide which ones meet the definitions. *This information is kept strictly confidential at all times.*

Social gradients and individual risks

From its inception, the Stress & Health study had two complementary aims - to improve our understanding of what leads one person to be at a higher risk of illness than another; and why there is a social gradient in risk - the higher the status the lower the risk of ill-health. We are making progress on both fronts. We have, on the whole, confirmed the importance to risk of individual life styles, that is, smoking, lack of exercise, high blood cholesterol levels and being overweight. In addition, we are shedding light on some new indicators of risk - having a typical apple-shaped distribution of fat (high ratio of waist to hips) is related to higher risk of diabetes and heart

disease compared to the pear-shaped distribution (high ratio of hips to waist).

These individual risk measures are not randomly distributed in the population but are related to the social hierarchy: the higher the status the more favourable the pattern. Other factors may also contribute to the social gradient, high risk of mental and physical ill-health, the work environment and financial and other difficulties outside work appear, from our study, to be of great importance.

Unique findings from research so far

A unique feature of the Stress & Health study is that we are exploring how stress actually affects the body. To do this we carried out several measures on the blood samples you gave us at previous screening examinations. One of these is fibrinogen, a blood clotting factor. High levels of fibrinogen in the blood are an indicator of increased risk of heart disease. New findings about fibrinogen from the Stress & Health study have recently been published in the prestigious journal *The Lancet*.

We found that working conditions can be associated with fibrinogen. This is very important as it shows that the work environment may influence future risk of heart disease by affecting the fibrinogen level in the blood. This may be one of the biological pathways through which stress acts to affect health.

This research adds to our ability to prevent heart disease by increasing knowledge of a range of influences on metabolism during the whole of life.

These are summaries of some of the work being carried out in the Stress & Health study. The study team is led by Professor Michael Marmot and comprises statisticians, research scientists, research assistants, nurses and support

staff. We hope that this newsletter has given you an insight into the current work of the study and of how vital your ongoing contribution to it is.

Once again, thank you for your continuing support