

Stress & Health Study

Autumn 1999



Phase 5 screening is complete ... but the work goes on!

Welcome to the autumn newsletter from the Stress & Health study. Since finishing the medical examinations in London and regional centres in the UK, the study team has been busy processing the range of information that you have provided. Some people who were not able to attend a medical screening have been contacted by phone and have kindly answered a brief telephone interview. We are very grateful to those of you who agreed to do this. It means that we are able to keep in touch with as many of our original participants as possible.

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Thank you for your letters



Thank you to everyone who gave comments regarding the phase 5 questionnaire. Issues that bothered participants were the length of time it took to complete (up to 2 hours); the relevance of some of the questions; and the personal nature of some of the questions. We have taken these comments very seriously and will try to address them in future questionnaires.

It may be helpful to explain a bit more about the process of drawing-up the questionnaire. Although the questions contained may appear diverse and unconnected, each component is carefully designed to answer a specific research question. Believe it or not many potential questions are turned down due to lack of space! We try to balance the need to answer unresolved issues about the relationship between work, home circumstances and health, without asking too much of you.

We are also aware that some of the questions touch on personal issues and these may cause distress. Other questions may seem unnecessarily detailed. However, every subject we ask about, such as childhood experiences, is an important part of our research programme. We are tremendously grateful that you are prepared to share these things with us to help us to continue our vital investigation into the relationship between stress and health.

The next postal questionnaire is due to be sent out in the years 2000 and 2001. This one will be shorter and more simple to complete.

From research to policy ... Getting things changed in the next millennium



You know us as the Stress & Health study but the media refer to us as the Whitehall studies of British Civil Servants. The studies continue to have an important influence in the understanding of inequalities in health and disease. The Stress & Health study (Whitehall II) has shown that features of the work environment and of the social environment outside of work, as well as circumstances from early life, are closely related to the biological processes that lead to disease.

The Whitehall II study made a direct contribution to the **Independent Inquiry into Inequalities in Health** report published in November 1998. Professor Michael Marmot was a member of the Inquiry team and results from the study were an important resource for the Inquiry. The Inquiry has recommended improving the quality of working practices together with complementary employment policies in order to improve health. Findings from the study were also reported in the Government White Paper **Saving Lives: Our Healthier Nation**. This is the first time that psychosocial factors such as: job insecurity, low-self esteem, social isolation and lack of control over work and home life have been acknowledged in relation to inequalities in health.

The Whitehall II study has also contributed towards a World Health Organisation publication entitled **Social**

Determinants of Health: The Solid Facts. The booklet outlines ten important messages about the social determinants of health and once again recognises that psychosocial factors at work and outside of work have an effect on physical health. This has been published worldwide. A book based on this booklet has recently been published giving a detailed background to each message.

The Whitehall II study is renowned internationally and now has 65 scientific papers published. Translating research into action and getting policies changed can be a very long and challenging process. The Stress & Health study is already making an important impact in the policy arena and, with your loyal and continued participation, Professor Marmot and his team plan to take this unique study into the millennium, providing clear evidence for policy makers and promoting an awareness of the social determinants of health.

Useful links

Web sites:

The Independent Inquiry is available at:

<http://www.open.gov.uk/>

The Solid Facts is available for downloading at <http://www.who.dk/healthy-cities/determ.htm>

A List of Whitehall II Publications is available at www.ucl.ac.uk/epidemiology/white/white.html

Our contribution to policy can be seen in:

Independent Inquiry into Inequalities in Health Report HMSO. London (1998).

Saving Lives: Our Healthier Nation HMSO. London (1999).

Social Determinants of Health: The Solid Facts. World Health Organisation. Copenhagen (1998).

Social Determinants of Health. Eds. Marmot M, Wilkinson R. Oxford University Press. Oxford. (1999).

Labour Market Changes and Job Insecurity. Ferrie J, Marmot M, Griffiths J, Ziglio E. World Health Organisation. Denmark (1999).



The importance of retirement

Thank you to all of you who continue to keep in contact with us despite having left the Civil Service.

Currently there is considerable interest in retirement as the number of people and the length of time spent in retirement increases. Very little is known about how retirement affects people in the UK. The Stress & Health study is in an excellent position to examine this as many of you are in the process of retiring and some of you have already retired.

Time spent in retirement has increased substantially as more people retire earlier and live longer. Many people can expect to spend more than 15-20 years in retirement, which is a considerable proportion of one's life.

There are many misconceptions about retirement. One of the most common is that when people retire from work they retire from life as well. We found exactly the opposite: that many of you are very active and happy to have left work. The main reason for early retirement used to be associated with ill health. However, we have found that whether participants retire early depends upon if they are enjoying their job and if their pension will be adequate following retirement. We also found that physical health is not directly affected by retirement. This is important information and enables us to give advice to other organisations about retirement and how they can help employees to prepare for it.

As you know the Stress & Health study has obtained an international reputation. We are hoping to continue the study for a long time but this depends upon your continued support. We hope in the future to provide further medical examinations, which will advise you about your health as you grow older.

Our promise of confidentiality with any information you give us still remains even if you have left the Civil service.

Please keep in contact. The history we have of the relationship between your work and health is very valuable for future generations



Smaller studies

The Stress & Health study is always seeking ways to improve our understanding of factors that affect people's health. Our results from the main study have been stimulating, raising questions that we wish to investigate further in smaller studies involving only a small group of the main study participants. Some of you took part in similar extra studies around the time of phase 5 medical screening.

We are conducting four smaller, additional studies at present. The first, the **biological response** study, is looking at the body's response to stress. The second, the **work observation** study, aims to identify stressful characteristics of work that affect people's health. The third study aims to investigate the effect of **job insecurity** and its contribution to health inequalities. Lastly, the fourth study is examining the interaction between **home and work life and its effect on health**.

For each of these studies a sample of you have been chosen. We have to ensure that we have a selection of participants with particular circumstances such as type of work, marital status and whether or not you have retired. The selection for groups is random and as always, confidential. We have already invited some of you who have been selected; others will be contacted in due course.

The study of health inequalities and what makes some people healthier than others is becoming an increasingly important and topical issue to address. We do realise we are asking for even more of your time and these extra studies are optional. However, we do hope you will consider assisting us in one of the smaller studies if requested.

If you are unable to participate in these special studies we would like to emphasise that it does not affect your participation in the main study, and we do hope that you will continue to participate in future phases of the Stress & Health study.

Into the next millennium

Due to the importance of our research findings and your continued participation, the study has been granted further funding. This enables us to plan for the next stages of the study.

Our main funders are:

British Heart Foundation

Medical Research Council

MacArthur Foundation (USA)

National Heart Lung & Blood Institute (USA)

National Institute of Aging (USA)

Professor Marmot and the team would like to thank you for your support and wish you a healthy and happy new millennium.



Keep in touch ... wherever you are



Please keep in touch with us and return the change of address card to us if you have moved. As you know we would like to remain in contact with all of you **whether you have retired or left the Civil Service.**

If you have any queries about anything in this newsletter or the study, or for a copy of the publications list please contact us by:

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