

The PATH through Life Project

2009 Newsletter

"Science to improve mental health and wellbeing across the lifespan"

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PATH's new 'image'

The PATH Project has a new image, as seen on your greeting card. The colours represent The ANU College of Medicine, Biology and Environment of which we, The Centre for Mental Health Research (CMHR), are a part.

Progress in 2009 and Plans for 2010

This year we completed interviewing our 40+ age group for the third time. The final number interviewed was 2182, nearly 93% of those interviewed at Wave 2. We are progressing well with interviewing our 60+ age group and expect to finish by the end of April 2010. Those in the 60+ age group who previously had brain MRIs are again being offered the opportunity to take part in this sub-study.

Our third 'Wave' of interviewing will be completed next year with Wave 4 not planned to start until early to mid 2011. We will be applying to the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), for funding to enable us to commence interviewing for Wave 4 in 2011. Fingers crossed!

10 Years of PATH

This year marks 10 years of the PATH Project. To celebrate this milestone, CMHR held a party on 22nd September. Dr Charles Guest, Chief Health Officer, ACT Department of Health, and Professor Nicolas Glasgow, Dean of the ANU Medical School, spoke briefly about the value of the PATH Project, while Professor Kaarin Anstey (pictured), the Chief Investigator on the Project, spoke about what we have learned so far and our aims for the next 10 years. A number of participants, who had expressed interest, attended the function as well as most of our researchers and interviewers. Kaarin and one of our 20+ participants were interviewed on 2CN and WIN news reported the event, including an interview with a 60+ participant.



Collaboration with ACT Department of Health

CMHR and ACT Health have established a collaboration that will allow CMHR researchers to prepare a report that will describe the characteristics related to the mental wellbeing of people living in the ACT and surrounding regions. Major objectives of this report are to inform policy and program intervention and to provide insights for future research. It is envisaged that this project will form a first step in a collaborative research partnership between ACT Health and CMHR.

Focus Groups

In January this year, many of our 60+ participants expressed interest in attending focus groups but, due to time constraints, we were only able to hold one meeting at which Professor Kaarin Anstey, Professor Helen Christensen, Dr Peter Butterworth and Dr Nic Cherbuin spoke briefly about their research on PATH data. AN opportunity was provided for participants to ask questions and everyone seemed to enjoy the evening.

Some Research Highlights

Cognitive performance and health behaviours: Kaarin Anstey and colleagues examined the association between cognitive ability and health behaviours over time. They found that those who performed better in the cognitive testing had higher levels of precautionary health behaviour such as taking vitamins and minerals and physical activity. However, the greatest improvement in health behaviours over four years was seen in those who performed more poorly in the Wave 1 cognitive testing. This suggests that other factors such as increasing health education, greater affluence or more available health education may influence improved health behaviours, particularly in those with lower cognitive scores.

Socio-economic position and depression: There is known to be a strong association between financial hardship and depression but the relationship is unclear. Peter Butterworth found that current financial hardship, but not past hardship, was strongly associated with depression, suggesting that addressing deprivation may be an effective strategy to moderate socio-economic inequalities in mental health.

In the last year CMHR researchers have used results from the PATH project to prepare two reports for the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Health.

In the first, "The stress and burden of caregiving: improving our understanding of how to promote better mental health and wellbeing", the researchers examined possible risk factors for poor mental health in caregivers that may be modified to improve their well-being. Poorer mental health was found in those with less support from family and friends, low workforce participation and limited financial resources. This report has identified a number of possible directions for future efforts to improve the circumstances of Australian caregivers.

The second report is entitled "A population health perspective on gambling". Currently, not enough is known about gambling frequency and problem gambling to provide guidelines for responsible or safe gambling, as exist for alcohol consumption. This report found a strong relationship between level of gambling activity and smoking and alcohol consumption, recent stressful life events, depression, anxiety and self-reported health problems. The results from this study represent a useful first step in helping to identify levels of responsible gambling, distinguishing risky levels that may lead to future problems. Such data will add to opportunities for developing secondary prevention and health promotion strategies, with the goal of reducing the incidence of personal and social problems arising from gambling behaviour.

The PATH team (From left): Carolan Marstin, Barbara Banvil, Karen Halliday, Margaret Chapman, David Fryer, Cathy Muggleton, Jean Bennett, Trish Jacomb, Liz Parkes, Karen Maxwell, Chantal Meslin, Kay Bowman, Lauren Bartsch



A special message to our 60+ participants

We are very aware that many of those who have been interviewed this year have found the interview long and tiring. We do really appreciate your perseverance in completing the interview as it is providing very valuable information for our study. But please don't give up on us now! In the next Wave of interviewing we will be using a number of strategies to make the interview less tiring. This may involve shortening the interview, skipping some sections if necessary or even doing the interview over two visits from our interviewers.

To the brain MRI participants: Last year we established a collaboration with the ANU Medical School which has enabled us to offer cardiovascular assessments to most of those having a brain MRI. As part of this arrangement, MRI scans are being done at The Canberra Hospital. Unfortunately, problems with scheduling combined with MRI scanners breaking down has resulted in some last minute cancellations. We do hope this situation will improve but unfortunately, we have very little control over this. We are very sorry for the inconvenience this has caused some people.