

Study aims to make us wiser about ageing

FROM INVESTIGATING drinking habits and social circumstances of Ireland's over 50s.

In six years time when it is completed, the huge challenge for the Government will be how it will use the study to improve healthcare and services, as Ireland and the rest of the world's ageing populations look set to increase dramatically in the coming years.

The ground-breaking 10-year study will allow health professionals to learn more about the people they treat and is hoped to positively impact on health policy in the future.

The study is being carried out by Trinity College Dublin in collaboration with an inter-disciplinary panel of scientific researchers from Dundalk Institute of Technology (DKIT), Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), National University of Ireland Galway (NUIG), The Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI), University College Cork (UCC), University College Dublin (UCD) and Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT).

Funding has been provided by the Department of Health and Children, Irish Life and the Atlantic Philanthropies.

With almost 7,000 of the 8,000 targeted participants already interviewed in the first wave of the study, Research Director with TILDA, Mr Brendan Whelan, explained the process is already highlighting some interesting facets of ageing.

The former Director of the ESRI noted the 50-64 year-old age group is already showing huge differences compared to those aged 65 and over. Currently, 58 per cent of the 6,800 participants are aged between 50 and 64.

"This is an age group with a big divergence, the younger people would have benefited from free education and those aged 65 plus experienced much different economic and social circumstances," Mr Whelan told *IMN*.

Funded by both the private and public sector, the total cost of the comprehensive study is €29 million and will involve revisiting respondents four separate times in order to test their health and identify links between various illnesses and diseases.

"We're doing very detailed cardiovascular measurements and looking at people's cognitive capacity, their capacity to remember and to reason and work things out, and we're trying to build a connection between the two," Mr Whelan stated.

"We will revisit the participants and see if we could have predicted the ones who would run into problems. We're trying to identify risk factors and early markers for disease because if we can do that we can intervene at an early stage."



Mr Brendan Whelan

Mr Whelan told *IMN* that another focus of the research is on falls as 30 per cent of older people who experience a fall never fully recover.

"When our respondents visit our health centre they walk along a mat with sensors on it and on the individual to try to examine their gait and balance," he explained.

"From this we are trying to develop predictors of whether they're likely to have cardiovascular problems in the future, which may lead to falls and problems.

"If we could develop a technique that looked at the way people walked it would be very useful."

Other key aspects of the study include family relationships, pensions, social integration and retirement to help reveal more about how people plan for the future.

The relationship between social participation and dementia and how social contact can delay the symptoms of dementia – an illness which is expected to rise dramatically in the future as the population ages – is also being examined.

Some 25,000 addresses in clusters throughout the country were selected in a scientific manner and each of these addresses were visited to see if a person aged over 50 was a resident there.

Willington participants then completed an interviewer-assisted personal interview with an interviewer before consenting to visit one of the TILDA health centres in TCD and UCC to undergo a thorough medical examination.

Mr Whelan revealed there was a 60 per cent response rate and that 88 per cent of this sample is opting to undergo a health assessment.

Taking into account some of the

participants may pass away during the course of the study, Mr Whelan said this will not act as an impediment but rather serve as a major factor of interest.

Almost every aspect of a person's health is being examined, including mood, obesity, mental and cognitive health among other detailed studies.

Phasic blood pressure, or blood pressure at every beat of the heart, autostatic variability will all be analysed.

Macular degeneration, the leading cause of blindness in old-age, is also under focus. A photo is taken of a person's eye, which is then used to assess their propensity towards macular degeneration and as a general study of the cardiovascular system.

"We're working with a team in Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) who have been doing work on this and the preliminary results suggest diet is a big factor in protecting against it. Highly coloured vegetables such as peppers and kale can help protect against it," Mr Whelan noted.

Healthcare utilisation forms a large part of the study with the records also examining how people use medical services.

"We don't have good data nationally on how many visits people make to the doctor and which people make those visits," Mr Whelan said.

"In the Irish context we're looking at how the different groups avail of healthcare and the medical card group... but the ones in the middle, the ones just beyond the limit for a medical card are in a really difficult situation... you tend to see very different utilisation patterns between the two so we are looking at how to understand how that system can be modified and improved."

The fact that richer people tend to live longer and are healthier than those on lower incomes has long been established, however, the study is attempting to shed light on whether healthcare, diet, lifestyle, activity, or a combination of all of these, are responsible.

Polypharmacy is an issue and Mr Whelan noted that four per cent of the population is taking more than 10 medications. He said that doctors are concerned about over prescribing and that the study hopes to document the number of medications people are on to help understand prescribing and usage patterns.

Similar studies are ongoing in India, China and Korea and a European study – SHARE – is currently surveying health and retirement. TILDA is cooperating with the Irish component of the SHARE study. Mr Whelan said he would like to see TILDA make Ireland one of the best places in the world to grow old but hinted this would only take place if the results was fully utilised and implemented for the betterment of society. The study's preliminary results are due to be published in May 2011.