

# Under the microscope

**PADDY CLANCY**

The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing aims to fill the information gap on people over 50

I'VE JUST given away to a total stranger a load of confidential information about my health and property and so far all I have had in return is a number somewhere between 7,980 and 7,990. It's on a list of 8,000 people whose lives will be monitored during the next 10 years by Tilda.

Tilda will be dropping in every two years to see how I'm progressing. My health, welfare, family life, property, money – even the way I walk – will be of constant interest to Tilda. Already I think of her as a lady, but she's no such thing.

Tilda is The Irish Longitudinal Study

on Ageing – a €29 million 10-year project to evaluate Ireland's ageing population. It's the most comprehensive study on ageing ever undertaken in Ireland and the information gathered will be used to improve the health of Irish people, social services and our economic policies.

Researchers on the project, launched in 2006, have described themselves as “really excited” this week. They have just completed their list of exactly 8,000 people over 50 years of age for the study. The home of everybody in the study was specifically chosen via a combination of postal addresses and a geographical directory from the Ordnance Survey.

I know I'm somewhere between 7,980 and 7,990 – because when I contacted Tilda at her – its – Trinity College HQ in Dublin after I was visited, I learned of the excitement that they had just over a dozen names to reach the targeted 8,000.

Of course, they are going to have an extra few names – presumably to cover any event that will prevent some people undergoing full medical tests to fol-



Paddy Clancy with his wife, Bernadette.

low the home interviews. But the list closes on February 14th and then work on a series of scientific publications will begin under Tilda principal investigator, Prof Rose Anne Kenny, who is head of the Department of Medical Gerontology at Trinity.

There is an acute shortage of social, economic and health information on older people in Ireland. Prof Kenny says the Tilda data will be crucial in filling the gap and will provide policymakers in health, social care, pension planning and biotechnology with a unique knowledge base.

Research director Brendan Whelan explains that after the 2006 launch by the then minister for health Mary Harney, there was a lot of early preparatory work done, including a study of international statistics and the preparation of appropriate interview and research machinery for the project. Then there were two pilot studies of 150 people in Dublin and 200 nationwide before the home interviews for the main project got under way last October.

It's a thoroughly extensive project. My interview lasted 90 minutes, during which I answered questions about what property I own, what pensions I have, what work I still do and what other income I earn, whether relatives and I help each other financially, what exercise I do, what interests me and a host of other details. My memory was tested and I will also have to undergo a full medical at either of the two project health-check centres – Dublin or Cork.

Although the home interviews only started in October, more than 4,500 subjects have already undergone their full medicals with specific aims. Blood systems are tested, eyesight, bone density and even the way people walk – officially titled in research details as “The Gait” – are examined.

The overall study is so intensive that, with age creating falling problems for people unsteady on their feet, there is an aim to identify persons at risk at an early age and take preventative measures for the future.

Already details are emerging in the research that Ireland's elderly are more active than in the past, better educated and largely tend to own their own homes. With increasing life expectancy, there will be many older people in the population in the coming years – one in five over 65 by 2036.



Fran Corcoran (far left) with her daughter Asha and husband Barry at home in Blackrock, Co Cork, and Duncan Menzies (left), who feature in *From Here to Maternity* on RTÉ 1. Photograph: Michael Mac Sweeney/Provision

Corcoran decide to allow such a personal experience be filmed?

“I am not a very public person. But when I met Edel, we had such a laugh and I felt very comfortable with her. I went into labour at midnight and sent Edel a text at 6am and said I was going into hospital.

“She rushed down to Cork and so by the time she arrived I was well gone. She came in all laughing and I enjoyed her company immensely. She then

came in to film when things got very full-on just before the delivery.”

Because they had managed to strike up a personal connection, when the cameras were rolling during the delivery Corcoran says she was able to ignore the fact that O'Brien and her crew were present.

“I totally forgot about the camera. I had my eyes closed for much of it, as I was in so much pain. I kept telling myself I could do this. I went inwards

“There's a palpable sense of anticipation and expectation in the hospital, and we tried to capture that

and so didn't see Edel there really.

“She was very discreet and the only time I was conscious of her was as I was delivering I saw the light of the camera. It distracted me for a moment, which was a good thing.”

Having already viewed the results of the filming with her husband Barry and 10-year-old son Ben, Corcoran admits to some apprehension about the programme, but feels that her participation is important in helping to remove

any remaining taboos around the issue of childbirth.

“In my mother's time, birth was almost like they were soiling the sheets. Mothers were wheeled away and no husband was present. Now it is a process which is very caring and people come in and visit, and I think it's good to show that.”

Another participant in the series is first-time father Duncan Menzies, who also met O'Brien by chance when he and his wife, Tara, attended the hospital for a scan. Tara was subsequently admitted, and the couple allowed access before and after delivery of their daughter Kate.

“I suppose every guy is different. Some guys would never chat about birth on camera, while other fellas could talk about it all day.

“For me, I was more thinking about the fact that if I participated my wife and daughter can go back and look at it years later.”

Because it was their first child, Menzies says they were reluctant to allow filming of the birth but his reactions soon after were recorded.

“After Kate was born I went through it with the crew. At the time I was so tired I can barely remember what I said.

“I can only imagine what it is going to come out like on the camera. I remember I was very much in awe of what my wife had gone through.”

And while Menzies is comfortable discussing childbirth, he says he is preparing himself for something of a gentle ribbing from male friends and colleagues when the series is screened.

“We men are not very open by our nature or talkative about these things too much. I haven't told my male friends yet exactly when it is on. I am already getting slagged in work and it hasn't even been shown yet!”

*From Here to Maternity* begins on RTÉ 1 on Tuesday, February 22nd, at 8.30pm