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from the project director

Dear Participant,

Many thanks for your continued involvement in the Women's Health Australia project. The project is now in its ninth year and many thousands of women across Australia are still taking the time to complete our surveys. The information you give us is used to prepare reports for government departments for use in policy decisions. This year we have written reports on women and alcohol, retirement planning, and the experience of domestic violence, among other important topics.

Many of the women aged 78 to 83 were invited to complete surveys this year. These surveys were about heart disease, caring for others, and the prevention of falls. These are all issues which have a major impact on the health of older women. We are very appreciative of everyone who has taken the time out of their already busy lives to complete these additional surveys. If you are in this age group and did not receive a survey on any of these important issues, you will have an opportunity to complete a major survey next year, 2005.

Thank you again for continuing to share your experiences and thoughts as part of the Women's Health Australia project.

Annette Dobson

Annette Dobson  
Project Director



c u r r e n t e v e n t s

This year women aged 53 to 58 have been invited to complete their fourth major survey for the project. The response has been amazing and we are very grateful for your support.

If you are in this age group and have not yet received or have misplaced your survey please call us on our Freecall number **1800 068 081** and we will send you another survey.

## Responses to the surveys show us how Young women's lives are changing ...



Younger

	At Survey 1 in 1996	At Survey 2 in 2000	At Survey 3 in 2003
were married	8 %	25 %	41 %
had a child	8 %	18 %	29 %
smoked	31 %	27 %	24 %
never had spare time on their hands	26 %	37 %	42 %

### Partnerships against domestic violence

Violence against women is a major problem that has severe negative effects on women's physical and mental health. Preventing domestic violence is a major part of the Commonwealth Government's strategy for strengthening families, preventing family breakdown and building healthy and safe communities. The Office of the Status of Women has assisted us to measure the effect of violent relationships on women's lives.

Disturbingly, there is a strong connection between violence, pregnancy rates and difficulties in pregnancy and childbirth. Women who had experienced violence from partners were more likely to have had a miscarriage and even more likely to have had a stillbirth, a premature birth or an abortion. Women who had suffered abuse also had a

higher risk of sexually transmitted diseases. Partner violence was also strongly associated with depression, anxiety disorders, self harm and suicidal thoughts.

Women who were able to leave the violence behind showed many improvements in health and wellbeing. Assisting women to avoid or escape from violent situations will benefit their physical, reproductive and emotional health. It also emphasises the importance of assisting health services to provide a more effective response. The research team at Women's Health Australia is grateful to the women who chose to tell us of their personal experiences. The Office of the Status of Women is disseminating this information so that it may inform government policy.



In addition to their answering questions on the surveys, many participants write about their lives and reactions to the survey. They also tell us how they are coping with the many changes in their lives.

Danielle told us about her lifestyle ...

*" I lead a very busy life. I have a fulltime job, as a customer service officer, which I really enjoy. My husband and I have two boys aged two and four who go to child care two days a week and spend the other days with either sets of grandparents. They are getting the best of both worlds. I share a hobby, with my husband, we love to restore antique furniture. We go to auctions and choose the furniture together, he restores it and then we resell it. In addition to this we are currently selling our first ever home and building a new house in a more rural location, we hope to own a much larger property one day. I was brought up on a farm and would like that lifestyle for my children. I really enjoy filling out the survey, it gives me the opportunity to think about the changes in my life over the past few years. "*

# Our surveys show that women in their 50s ...

	At Survey 1 in 1996	At Survey 2 in 1998	At Survey 3 in 2001
rated their health good, very good or excellent	88 %	88 %	86 %
never had spare time on their hands	64 %	64 %	65 %
still had children living with them	62 %	58 %	45 %
found it easy or not too bad managing on income available	56 %	56 %	64 %



## Mid-age Women and Mental Health

Mental health is one of Australia's National Health priorities. Women in all age groups with mental health problems are high users of health services. The Women's Health Australia project is providing an opportunity for health providers to understand how women make sense of their distress and to assess if they are providing appropriate and acceptable services to women. Our research suggests that most women with mental health symptoms do not seek professional help, and many feel embarrassed about asking for help. Approximately 12% of women have been diagnosed with mental health conditions, but over 20% report symptoms of poor mental health. The identification, treatment and prevention of minor but common mental health problems can prevent major illness. Because the Women's Health Australia project looks at women's health over

time, it is a valuable tool in predicting future diagnosis of depression. Physical activity, non-smoking and having a healthy body weight are already recognised as important in the prevention of major chronic physical disease, but the project shows that these factors are likely to impact positively on mental health as well.

Interviews with mid-age women identified personal, family and work-related problems as the most common causes of distress. Almost all the women interviewed perceived themselves as having strengths such as perseverance, stubbornness and independence that helped them cope with adversity. Those whose mental health had improved believed this to be due to the support of their families and their own efforts.



You may recall last year Sandra wrote to tell us of her changing lifestyle. We caught up with Sandra recently:



*Since I last wrote my husband and I have sold our Bed and Breakfast and have bought the local general store in the same small town. We moved here from the city; you just can't compare the caring small town lifestyle with life in the suburbs. We love the town, the area and the people so much. We always said we would never, never build our own home and now we have ideal location, homes are in short supply so that "never" goes out the window, along with the one that said we would never own our own business! Anything to keep us in our own piece of heaven. Although we live a far distance from our family we keep in touch constantly and visit fairly regularly. Apart from helping to run the store, and building a house I do have some other forward plans, I am now learning to ride a horse as next year I am going on the 2005 Outback Cattle Drive. Life is Great! Busy but Great!*



## Did you know that many Older women in the Women's Health Australia study...



Older

	At Survey 1 in 1996	At Survey 2 in 1999	At Survey 3 in 2002
said they had mostly been a happy person	83 %	86 %	85 %
said they had mostly felt calm and peaceful	69 %	72 %	69 %
said they were as healthy as anybody they knew	68 %	72 %	70 %
had walked briskly at least once a week	n/a	57 %	54 %

### A snapshot of healthy ageing

Every time we send out a survey we invite everyone to make additional comments about their health on the back page of the survey. We read every comment and try to reply to all requests for information and help. We cannot provide any specific health advice, but our staff members always try to refer participants to the appropriate source. In 2002, over 4000 women aged 76 to 81 years took the opportunity to provide additional information. This has enabled us to get a picture of some of the activities undertaken by women in this age group.

Walking is the most common physical activity amongst older women but a wide variety of activities was also mentioned. By far the most popular was gardening, with swimming, aqua aerobics and bowls (indoor, ten pin and lawn) also popular. Many older women enjoyed cycling for

pleasure or to the local shops. Golf and tennis were popular, as were indoor sports such table tennis and badminton. The gyms and dance halls were busy. Tai chi, yoga, pilates and low impact aerobics were frequently mentioned, along with several forms of dancing. Many women mentioned the importance of creative pursuits in their lives. Handicrafts, music, bridge, art, reading, writing, cooking and crosswords were all undertaken on a regular basis. Many women were studying at a number of levels from completing PhDs, to learning new languages, with many enjoying the programs offered by the University of the Third Age. The support of family and friends and belonging to organisations is a very important part of our respondents' lives and many took the opportunity to tell us how much they enjoy the company of friends.



June wrote to tell us about her busy life and her thoughts on ageing:



*I live on a 150 acre farm raising cattle on the side of a mountain. Activities vary daily and whatever life is on a farm, it is never dull. Over the past three years since my last survey, I have learned to walk more slowly and take a stick when going up the mountain to make sure I maintain my balance. I also use the car more often to go to the far paddocks. I know I can only stay here if I am mentally and physically fit.*

*I aim to stay that way as I love living here, it is incredibly beautiful. I feel so lucky that I have the opportunity to be with my children and grandchildren. I believe it is important that the different generations talk with each other,*

*I really enjoy the conversations I have when they are here.*





# The Work - Life Project



Balancing personal, family and work demands can impact enormously on individuals and families. This year 50 younger participants and their partners were invited to take part in a project that seeks to better understand how working parents cope with family and work responsibilities. Next year it will be the turn of 50 mid-age women and their partners.

The Work-Life project has involved standard paper surveys, interviews conducted over the telephone, focus groups and a survey completed on a palm pilot (hand-held computer). Each participant was provided with a hand-held computer that beeped at various times throughout the day. When the participants heard a beep they completed a small survey on the computer about their current activities and how they were feeling at that time.

Participants generally enjoyed using the hand-held computers, but some women had to decline because they were too busy! We are very grateful to everyone who took part, especially as many had small children who found the whole business of a beeping hand-held device that looked like a game fascinating, and wanted to help! For now this is a one-off method of collecting data, but maybe in the future this will be a standard means of obtaining quick and accurate information.

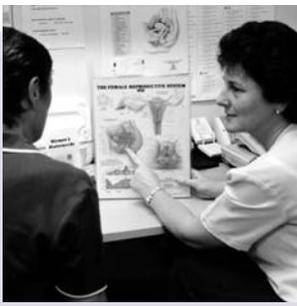
Understanding the experience and impact of work-life tension and the strategies for managing time in time-crunched households, will contribute to national and international debate about the social and economic costs associated with time pressure and stress.



Thank you again to everyone who took the time to take part in this research!

Danielle, June and Sandra wrote to us because they thought we would be interested in their experiences – and we were! We rang them to make sure they didn't mind having parts of their very interesting letters included in the newsletter, and they were pleased to help.

Danielle, June and Sandra were happy to share their stories. Other women aren't, and that's their choice. We won't put anything about you in the newsletter unless you tell us it's all right. But if you would like to share your thoughts with other women, we are always happy to hear from the wonderful women whose unique personal experiences contribute to this project.



## Putting information together to improve health and health care services for Australian women

### Background

You may remember that during this project we have asked you for permission to receive details from the Health Insurance Commission about your use of Medicare-funded health services. By putting the Medicare data together with the survey data, we have looked at general patterns of use of health services, particularly general practitioner and specialist consultations. Having these data has helped us to write reports about women's access to health services and particularly how much the services cost according to where women live around the country. These reports have been provided to the government to help improve services for women.

### What's new?

Following discussion with the Health Insurance Commission, information held by the HIC may be regularly provided to the research team from 2005 without you needing to consent every time. Other information such as birth and death records, disease registers and hospital discharge records may also be available subject to strict privacy and confidentiality rules. Names and addresses are not included with the information. The project staff analysing these datasets and the survey data

have signed confidentiality statements and they have no information in the datasets that could identify an individual person. This research is conducted in accordance with relevant privacy requirements and other legislation protecting this information and is subject to final approval being granted by government and university ethics committees.

### What happens next?

You do not need to do anything. However if you have any questions about this process or if you need more information, please call the Freecall number and we will send you a more detailed information sheet. If you have concerns about this new method of data collection, you can opt-out of this by phoning the Freecall number **1800 068 081**. We will provide updates in future newsletters about our progress and findings and how this research will benefit the health of women now and in the future.

If you have any concerns about this project, and would prefer to discuss these with an independent person, you should feel free to contact the University of Newcastle's Human Research Ethics Officer, Ms Sue O'Connor, on 02 4921 6333 or write to her at Research Branch, The University of Newcastle, University Drive, Callaghan NSW 2308.



## Useful Links

### [www.women.gov.au](http://www.women.gov.au)

A single access point for Australian government information relating to women in a user-friendly, easy to use environment.

### [www.osw.dpmc.gov.au](http://www.osw.dpmc.gov.au)

The Australian Government Office of the Status of Women (OSW) is a policy advisory unit and a division of the Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

### Emailing the Project

Many participants email us and we love to hear from you. To make sure your message reaches us, it would be helpful if you wrote the words *WHA Participant* in the subject line. Our email address is [whasec@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:whasec@newcastle.edu.au)

