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from the project director

Dear Participant,

Once more, thank you for your continued participation in Women's Health Australia. The information that you provide to us is being used to help understand the issues faced by women of all generations across Australia, as well as to shape government policy in ways that benefit women.

Recently we were asked to prepare a series of reports for the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing on five topics: Health services and social disadvantage; ageing – in the context of the government's "Intergenerational Report"; health issues in rural areas; mental health; and physical inactivity and overweight. In this newsletter we have used some parts of the reports that we hope you will find interesting.

Thank you for participating. We know that women of all ages across Australia lead busy lives, and we appreciate your taking the time to share your thoughts and opinions with us.

Annette Dobson

Annette Dobson
Project Director



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

This year it is the turn of our Younger participants aged 25 to 30 years to receive a survey. We mailed out 13,100 surveys in March and at the time of this newsletter going to press we have received over 64% of them back. A great response! If you are in the Younger group and have not received your survey or have misplaced it, please call us on our **Freecall number 1800 068 081** and we will send you a replacement.

Did you know that...

Overall, 23% of Younger Australian women intend to have three or more children – but it's up to 30% in rural areas. This has important implications for the provision of services in the bush. It also has implications for housing in the cities – we are sometimes asked by journalists to comment on social trends. Data from Women's Health Australia suggest that most young women would like to be married or in a stable relationship and to have children by the time they are 35, not living single lives in city apartments.



Younger

Responses to the surveys show us how Younger women's lives are changing

	At Survey 1 in 1996	At Survey 2 in 2000
were married	9 %	25 %
had a child	10 %	19 %
wanted a child by age 35	92 %	92 %
smoked	31 %	27 %
had seen an alternative health practitioner	19 %	16 %
felt rushed or pressured every day	18 %	19 %
never had spare time on their hands	25 %	38 %
average weight	62 kgs	66 kgs
in full-time paid work	33 %	57 %
preferred to always see a female doctor	20 %	18 %

In addition to your answers to the questions on our surveys, many of you write about your lives and your reactions to the survey. You also tell us how you are coping with the many changes in your lives.

For example Luka who has recently had a baby wrote...

I would just like to say that in general I am a well and happy person. In most cases of answers in relation to health, I only am worn out, tired because I care for my child. I am completely happy to do this.

Thanks for letting me be part of this. I am interested to hear the results and personally I feel there is a lot of support and services for women available. However, I think that a bigger contribution could be made in attitudinal and myth expelling adjustments. Especially when it comes to motherhood and our coping expectations. As well as societal pressures, we have image and lifestyle adjustments, lack of sleep and a deepened dependency on our spouse to adjust to – not to mention the emotional hormone rollercoaster.

Women are pretty amazing.

Did you know?

Neither did we... until you told us!

35% of Mid-age women have some problem with leaking urine... but most have never been to a health professional for help. This is the kind of information from the Study that was used in the development of the national "Continence Strategy". Yes, there really is a National Strategy on urinary incontinence (or bladder trouble, as it is more often known). It is one of the main reasons why older people may need to go into institutional care, and we are using the survey data to help develop education and prevention campaigns to make life better for older (and ageing) Australians.



Mid-age

Our surveys show that women in their 50s may be experiencing many changes.

Here are some examples...

At Survey 1 in 1996

At Survey 2 in 1998

At Survey 3 in 2001

preferred to see a female doctor for certain things 29 %

27 %

had visited an alternative practitioner 28 %

29 %

25 %

did vigorous exercise at least once a week

17 %

22 %

were caring for their grandchildren or other people's children

8 %

14 %

average weight 69 kgs

70 kgs

71 kgs

never or rarely drank alcohol 45 %

41 %

At Survey 3, Sandra wrote to tell us of her changing experiences...

Life begins at 50.

Whoever said "life begins at 40" is barmy as the kids are still at home and we're still dealing with these and such other life crises!! I organized a motor bike tour around Australia, a "motorcycle odyssey – a women's tour of outback". 10 women and myself rode 8000 kms taking in Uluru, Darwin, Mt Isa, Longreach, Bourke, Broken Hill and Adelaide. I pat myself on the back! I never dreamt I could organize myself out of a paper bag. End result was, we raised \$25,000 for the Royal Flying Doctor Service, I have made good friends across 3 states and my husband and I have made a major life change and now work in the hospitality industry. We run a coffee shop and bed and breakfast, by day's end we are exhausted.

*It's supposed to be semi-retirement, that's a laugh. //
But we love it.*



Older

The Older women in Women's Health Australia represent a generation of women who have lived through experiences of the Depression, global war, and overwhelming technological and social change. Over one-third of Older women in the survey rate their health as excellent or very good, and only 4% rate their health as poor. As you would expect, Older women's physical health is poorer than that of Younger women. But their mental health is better. Older women are less stressed, less depressed, and less rushed and pressured than Mid-aged or Younger women. Something for the rest of us to look forward to!

Despite their health conditions, many of our respondents describe themselves as being "in really good health for my age". We are very impressed by the resilience of these Older women. For many of them, life has not been easy, and they are now experiencing aches and pains – but they are still active, still contributing, still making a difference.

Arthritis was the most common chronic condition among Older women (42% at Survey 2, in 1999). Women with arthritis are more likely to need help with daily tasks, and make more use of health services, including GPs, specialists and hospital doctors, as well as alternative practitioners. The number of Older women with osteoporosis has increased over time. It was reported by 22% of women at Survey 1 and 35% at Survey 2.

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

provide regular volunteer work in their communities	21 %	live in a house	27 %
provide childcare	20 %	live in a flat or unit	19 %
have participated in paid work at some time during their lives	90 %	live in a retirement village	7 %
have had at least one child	90 %	have a dog	20 %
have had four or more children	25 %	have a cat	13 %
are widowed	48 %	have a bird	8 %

25% go out to clubs, church or social groups at least three times a week.
(Our survey data show that volunteer work, social activities, and a sense of belonging in the neighbourhood contribute to health among older women.)

Participants in the Older age group (77 to 81 years) also write to us about their lives.

Doreen told us how much she enjoyed being part of a group in her town...

I belong to a support group in our local town. The group allows us to do many things we would be unable to do on our own. Our activities include a regular weekly walk, ten pin bowling once a month and going to other events like the theatre and sporting events (like the Hopman Cup and the cricket at Lilac Hill) fortnightly. We do slightly crazy things like stopping at the ice-creamery on the way home for regular tastings of the new flavours and joining the truckies and motor bike riders for pea 'n ham soup and hamburgers on cold winter nights at another café.

All this keeps us healthy and happy and we have a network of friends who we can depend on if we needed them.

March 2004

Next year in March we will be mailing surveys to our Mid-age participants. If you are in this age group (53 to 58) expect to see a survey around this time. Please don't forget to tell us if you have changed your name or moved, either by calling our **Freecall number 1800 068 081** or by completing the change of address card which you will find enclosed with your survey.

Substudies

From time to time we run smaller surveys on different topics. Early in 2004, a particularly special group of participants will receive a small additional survey: it is for a sample of women who have told us that you are caring for other people in some capacity or other. This is part of the work we are doing on a number of topics related to ageing, and which will provide information for government policy makers.

b a l a n c i n g w o r k a n d l i f e



It's the big question, isn't it – everyone seems to be running faster to stay in the one place. How we manage to balance our work life, family responsibilities, and time for relaxation and enjoyment – while still getting enough sleep – is a tough question for us all!

Finding the right balance has a major effect on health, which is why we are increasingly asking questions about how you spend your time and what you'd ideally like to do to achieve that balance.

The information you have given us has produced some surprising results when we looked at who was doing what with their time!

Mid-age women who are in the workforce and are also providing family care (for an elderly or disabled family member) are more likely than others to move out of the workforce, and their health tends to be poorer.

Caregivers have to deal with stress and with restrictions on employment, social activities and leisure choices. While many caregivers receive government allowances, they are also making a huge unpaid contribution to their families and to the country. Unfortunately caregivers often feel unappreciated, and those in work feel that their caregiving role interferes with their ability to perform well at work. Caregiving is one issue that is being considered in attempts to create family-friendly workplaces.



In the next survey of Mid-age women, we intend to ask some questions about retirement plans. As the Mid-age women move through their 50s, many are starting to think about the longer-term future and what they would like for their old age.

Understanding what you think is important and will help us to provide appropriate advice to government.

return to sender



We endeavour to contact participants who have moved and for whom we no longer have a current address. We do try to keep track of you all! Joanne, whose survey came back to us "return to sender" and whom we then found, said

"Thanks must go to you guys who have tracked me down 3 times now despite my moving about. 'Tis a strangely satisfying feeling to know that I am part of something bigger than me and my world. Also that has lasted longer than any project, job, study or relationship of mine. Keep finding me."

We know you are busy and we have really enjoyed the notes some of you have written about where and how you are completing the surveys. They have been returned to us from all corners of the globe.

For example Amber wrote...

"Just to let you know, I've been filling this form out over a period of two weeks. In these two weeks I have resigned from a job, moved out of a house and am currently sitting on a plane bound for El Salvador for an indefinite period of time. In other words, it's not the most normal of times!"

We also enjoy the additional decorations some people's children have provided on the surveys!



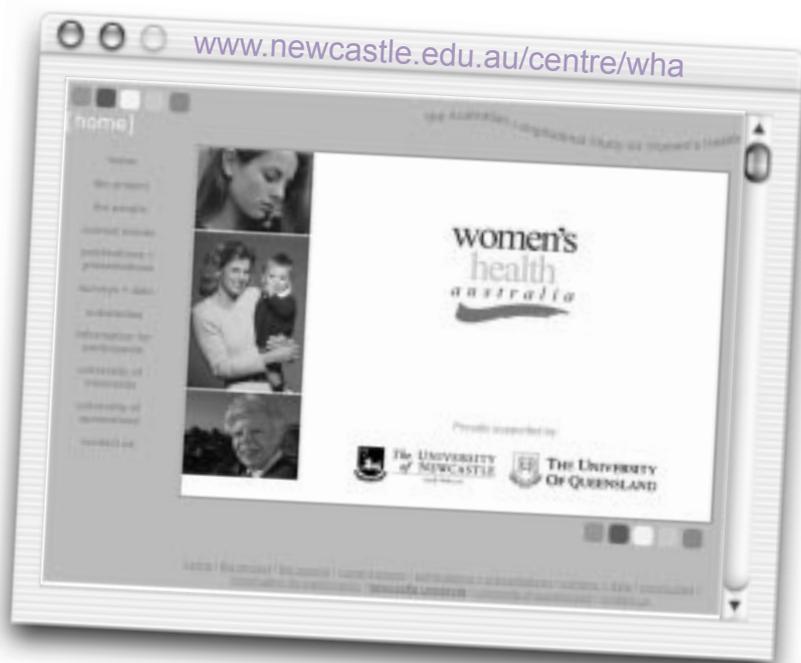
How time flies!

Women's Health Australia has now been running for eight years. Thank you for staying with us through all that time! It was in 1995 that we first started developing the project and began to work with our 'pilot' samples, and in 1996 that we first conducted the main surveys.

Each 'pilot' sample consists of several hundred women who live in two regional areas of New South Wales. Every year, we develop next year's survey and try it out with these women. They are kind enough to complete the survey and also to tell us what they think about the way we word the questions, the layout of the survey, things we ought to ask that are missing, and things we have asked that they feel are too personal for a survey like this. Their comments help us revise the survey before it goes to everybody else.

We'd like to say an additional thank you to these women.

We've been back to everyone three times now, and are gearing up for the fourth survey of the Mid-age group of women. *That's a lot of surveys.* The storage compactus in the basement – where surveys are stored under lock and key - is full and we're ordering a second one!



'Luka, Sandra, Doreen, Joanne and Amber' 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.

'Luka, Sandra, Doreen, Joanne and Amber' 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.