

Health after the workplace – is retirement a health hazard for men?

| Anthony Brown

Work is the great paradox of men's health. The workplace can be a dangerous and potentially unhealthy place for many; yet involvement in satisfying, creative and valued employment is one of the greatest contributors to men's *good* physical and mental health. Leaving the workplace may, therefore, represent a health challenge for many men. A discussion on the relationship between health and the workplace also needs to ask the question: what happens to men and their health after they leave the workforce?

'When you retire you die'

Anecdotally retirement appears to be the forerunner of deterioration and death. A popular writer on men's issues sees retirement as a 'bad idea' because 'when you retire, you die' [1]. Such attitudes are not new, research conducted over 50 years ago shows the widely held attitude that retirement, for men, prefigures ill health and death [2].

The reality though seems somewhat difficult to determine. Academia has been interested in the link between men's health and retirement since at least the 1930s. Despite almost 80 years of research into men's retirement there is still no agreement on the effect of retirement on men's health. Recent research has suggested that retirement, particularly early retirement, does have a negative impact on morbidity (of both men and women) [3], whereas others maintain that retirement has no effect on physical health [4]. Demographic studies have suggested that work is a protective factor against premature death [5], whereas other studies are more ambivalent on the effect of retirement on mortality [6,7].

Employment and health

Being in paid employment confers many health benefits, the most obvious being a regular income. While employment does not guarantee affluence, the relationship between poverty and poor health is well documented [8]. Other potentially health conferring aspects of work include: a sense, to varying degrees, of being in control of one's life [8]; feelings of being productive [9]; doing something which is valued by others [10]; and a place where men make friends [11]. One of the themes running through much of this literature throughout the 20th Century is that men personally invest much in their work, that it gives them status, a sense of identity [12–15].

There is strong evidence that much of men's self identity comes from paid employment [12–15]. A self-identity based, in part, on productive and valued work can be health affirming. Such positive aspects of a self identity partly based on work are often overlooked, particularly by those theorists and practitioners who are critical of what they see as men's over-identification with work and the workplace. While there is a danger and health risk to those who do over-identify with work, I would suggest that the positive aspects of a self-identity based on fulfilling and valued work need also be emphasised and encouraged as part of a balanced life.

Crisis of retirement

Retirement can, therefore, represent a crisis for some men [13], as this source of self-identity is removed, together with the other health-affirming aspects of work described above. Retirement can also impact negatively

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on men's social wellbeing [16], bringing unexpected isolation [14,16]. Many men report that keeping in touch with friends made through work is difficult, particularly if those friends are still working, as they have less in common to talk about [14,15]. For men in this situation, the lack of social support and resulting social exclusion represent real health risks [8].

The other challenge experienced in retirement is the realisation that positive expectations are not met. Some men look forward to finishing paid work, anticipating retirement as a period of freedom and activity [12], while others are more cautious and uneasy about having sufficient money and having 'enough to do' [17]. The perceived 'success' of retirement is determined often by how these pre-retirement expectations are met [15]. Dissatisfaction with retirement can occur when positive expectations of retirement are unfulfilled due to unanticipated negative life events, such as illness, disability or dissatisfaction with social supports [15,18].

A happy and healthy retirement

Despite these challenges, many men do have a healthy and happy retirement. Some men achieve this through maintaining and even building new satisfying social networks, while others seek out work-like activities to partici-

pate in [16]. Social economic status also influences retired men's health.

While money may not buy happiness, men of greater wealth are more likely to have the resources to maintain both good health and social connections in retirement. Men further up the social ladder are in a better position to cope with the challenges that the transition to retirement brings [8]. Wealth also brings the ability to meet more pre-retirement expectations.

What is clear is that a healthy and happy retirement is due, at least in part, to social factors such as income and social support. These are among the factors recognised by the World Health Organisation as the social determinants of health [8]. It may well be that these social determinants of health are also the determinants of a happy and healthy retirement.

Health and unemployment

This editorial has focused on the potential risk that retirement poses for men. While some of the arguments around health and retirement are contested it should also be remembered that the relationship between unemployment and poor health is well documented. Unemployment brings a significant health risk for younger people (both men and women) and communities as a whole [8].

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