Gender, mental health, physical health and retirement: A prospective study of 21,608 Australians aged 55–69 years

Julie E. Byles a,*, Kha Vo b, Peta M. Forder a, Louise Thomas a, Emily Banks c, d, Bryan Rodgers e, Adrian Bauman f

a The Research Centre for Generational Health and Ageing, University of Newcastle, Newcastle, Australia
b The George Institute for Global Health, Sydney, Australia
c The National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia
d The Sax Institute, Sydney, Australia
e College of Arts and Social Sciences, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia
f School of Public Health, University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 1 September 2015
Received in revised form 12 February 2016
Accepted 15 February 2016

Keywords:
Mental health
Physical health
Retirement
Gender
Longitudinal

ABSTRACT

Objectives: We examined retirement transitions by gender, and different associations between retirement, physical function and mental health.

Methods: Data for 21,608 participants aged 55–69 from the 45 and Up Study were used. Generalised estimating equations were used to investigate longitudinal associations between retirement with psychological distress (Kessler score, K10) and physical dysfunction across two time points, by gender separately.

Results: Retirement in men was associated with a 25% relative increase in mean physical dysfunction score (p<0.001) and a 2% relative increase in mean K10 score (p=0.004), although men with high physical dysfunction score had a 6% increase in mean K10 score (p=0.005) if retired. For women, retirement was associated with a 17% increase in mean physical dysfunction score (p<0.001), with no association observed with the K10 score. Results were adjusted for demographic and health covariates.

Conclusion: Retirement is associated with physical dysfunction over time. Retirement is not associated with psychological distress among women, but retirement is associated with psychological distress among men who have a high level of physical dysfunction. The findings point to the importance of attending to the physical and mental health needs, around the retirement period, particularly for men with poor physical health.

© 2016 Elsevier Ireland Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Retirement can be seen as a positive life transition, a time of reinvention and greater freedom and choice, or as a negative life event, depending on socio-economic position, life stage, health, and other social and economic circumstances [1–6]. Likewise, retirement may be a period of well being, or a time of poor physical and mental health.

For men, retirement has traditionally represented a gateway between working life and a life of leisure. This traditional construct is closely tied to meanings of work embedded in the male breadwin-
smaller percentage of women than men are in the labour force (47% compared to 61%, respectively) [9]. The average retirement age for women aged 45 and over in Australia is 50 years.

Given the gender differences in nature of work and retirement, it is of interest to determine whether retirement is associated with different changes in health for men and women. Longitudinal studies have shown that retirement can have negative effects on mental and physical health (particularly where retirement is involuntary or at younger ages), or positive effects, depending on the timing and circumstances surrounding retirement [1,12–14]. However these findings seem to apply particularly to men, who have a more traditional workforce attachment, and for whom retirement may have a greater negative effect on well being. Few studies have examined the separate effects for men and women. The aims of this analysis were to examine retirement transitions among a large cohort of men and women, and to identify gender differences in associations between retirement status and mental and physical health.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The 45 and Up Study is a large scale study conducted by the Sax Institute (http://www.45andup.org.au) which recruited 267,151