

Research

Looking at the bigger picture



“It’s not just the size and scope of the study that sets it apart, it’s that it will never really stop. We will keep collecting research, keep analysing the results.”

There are many research studies on women’s health happening every day in all corners of our country. Usually this research looks at a specific health issue, or investigates a particular treatment or age group, giving us valuable insight and building our knowledge. But what about the bigger picture?

What if we could cast a net across the whole of Australia? Not only that, what if we could capture the whole lifespan of women – young, mid-life and older women – and revisit these women year after year? What stories would this research tell us? What would we learn about our own health, our community’s health – about our grandmothers,

mothers, sisters and daughters?

For the past 17 years, Associate Professor Deborah Loxton has been doing exactly that: looking at the bigger picture. Assoc Prof Loxton is the deputy director of the largest and longest-running study on women’s health in Australia: the Australian Longitudinal Study of Women’s Health (ALSWH).

Together with a large team, Assoc Prof Loxton has been collecting and analysing survey data from over 58,000 women across four separate groups from all around the nation. “It’s not just the size and scope of the study that sets it apart, it’s that it will never really stop. With this study, there’s no end date – we will keep collecting research, keep

FAST FACTS ON WOMEN’S HEALTH IN AUSTRALIA



The life expectancy of girls born between 2003-2005 is 83 years, compared to 78 years for boys



In 1996 a third of young women smoked. By 2013, less than one in five smoked



The rate of young women with sleep problems or back pain have doubled since 1996



Rural women often show strength and good coping skills when faced with hardships such as drought



Of women aged 65 years or over, 69% consider themselves to be in good, very good or excellent health



Heart disease is the leading cause of death and disability for older women



analysing the results, and it will continue well after my own retirement!" says Assoc Prof Loxton.

The ALSWH is a unique collection of research that spans broadly as well as deeply. "We're looking at the social, psychological, physical and environmental factors that determine good health and ill health in women throughout their adult life," says Assoc Prof Loxton.

In essence, it's about combing through the fine details with a big-picture approach – and it's a challenging task to undertake. "What I've learnt over the years is that as soon as you scratch the surface, you see that women's health and wellbeing is so much more complex than it first seems."

What has the study uncovered?

"One of the most shocking results to me is the increasing rates of obesity, not just within a generation but across generations," says Assoc Prof Loxton. The study found that while 20% of young women in 1996 were overweight or obese, this had increased to 33% of young women by 2013. What's more, there's a worrying trend that their weight gain is likely to increase as they enter mid-life, which poses risks to heart health, life quality and life expectancy

Older women not acting 'old'

The ALSWH is now in its 20th year. The oldest original study participants are now in their 90s and completing their 15th survey. Assoc Prof Loxton says that these surviving women are doing reasonably well and providing encouraging insight into what it's like to live as an older woman in Australia.

"It's been a real eye-opener to see the vast range of activities that older women are involved in. They are still volunteering into their 70s and 80s, and they have active social and family lives. These results really buck the stereotype of how our society views 90 year olds – they are not necessarily frail or in nursing homes, they are involved with the community, so that's been really fantastic to discover."

The stress of young adulthood

On the other end of the age spectrum, the study revealed that almost 50% of young women struggle with high levels of psychological distress. "We knew that mental health was a common issue across the country, but we simply weren't prepared for how much it affects women between 18 and 23 years [of age]."

The next step for the ALSWH research team is working out why this is happening and what we can do about it. "We don't have the answers just yet, but we have a few research papers and reports coming out in the near future, so watch this space," says Assoc Prof Loxton.

In spite of her in-depth knowledge of the study, or perhaps because of it, Assoc Prof Loxton still feels hopeful for women's health in Australia. "The fact that we're able to identify which health issues are a concern for women and investigate them is reassuring," she says. "We can use the study to not only shine a light on what issues women are experiencing, but to point the way to potential solutions as well."



Deborah Loxton is an Associate Professor at the University of Newcastle and is the Deputy Director of the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health

To find out more about the study, visit alswh.org.au

If you're experiencing depression or anxiety and need help urgently, please call Lifeline on 13 11 14