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EDITORS' BLOG

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Health gap 'widest in retirement'

The health gap between the lowest and highest paid occupational groups widens in retirement, a study has suggested.



Socialising may make for a happier retirement

A lifetime on a low wage physically ages a person eight years earlier than high earners, researchers found.

They followed more than 10,000 British civil servants aged 35 to 55, over a period of 20 years.

Physical health declined with age in all groups but most rapidly among those in the lowest occupational grades, the British Medical Journal reported.

Inequalities

The employees, working in 20 different departments and from all occupational grades, were surveyed five times between 1985 and 2004.

At retirement, despite leaving the civil service, the health gap not only continued but widened.

For example, the average physical health of a 70-year-old high earner was similar to the physical health of a low earner around eight years younger.

“ Retirement does not level the playing field. These health inequalities actually increase ”

Lead researcher Tarani Chandola

In mid-life, this gap was only 4.5 years.

Among high earners, retirement appeared to improve their mental health and wellbeing. But no similar improvement was seen in the lower occupational groups.

Although the researchers studied mainly white collar office workers, they believe the findings would be the same across other occupations.

And given the UK's ageing population, they say their findings have important implications for government policies to tackle health inequalities.

Golden years

Currently, people reaching state pension age in the UK

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have, on average, a life expectancy of a further 20 years for women and around 10 years for men.

In recent years, huge progress has been made in extending life expectancy, but there is debate about whether people are spending a larger part of their lives in self-perceived poor health.

Lead researcher Tarani Chandola, from University College London, said: "There has always been an assumption that the health gap gets narrower with age as people retire.

"But retirement does not level the playing field. These health inequalities actually increase. This is not a time to get complacent."

He suggested a number of factors could explain the differences they found - including lifestyle habits and income.

For example, a higher income might enable a pensioner to lead a more active social life and eat a healthier diet.

He said it would be interesting do to more work to find out why some people thrive in retirement.

Kate Jopling of Help the Aged said: "This shows very clearly that health inequalities are not something that happen only early life or childhood.

"We need to improve older people's lives and make sure they have a good income in retirement, but also ensure they have good access to improve their health - a good diet and social activities."

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