

ASPIRE – Active Ageing through Social Partnership and Industrial Relations in Europe *

Is Retirement a Turning Point for Healthier Lives in Old Age?

by Chris Ball

Nowadays official health advice is to ‘age actively’ if we want to look after ourselves. The Government, urges us to go on working. ‘Work is good for your health,’ they tell us, but is it really? It is of course, an over-simplification.

Much depends on the individual as well as the work they do. ‘Good work,’ which is personally satisfying, may well be good for you, but not everyone is blessed with jobs they love and great working conditions. But, what of retirement? Some observers note that retiring carries health risks. Can this be true?

Looked at objectively, retirement *ought* to offer a ‘window of opportunity’ for healthier lifestyle changes. With no stressful pressures of work and more time for leisure, why shouldn’t older people become models of health and efficiency?

Researchers from the Institute for Policy Studies (part of Westminster University) have been looking at this question. They wanted to know whether people see retirement as an opportunity to adopt healthier life-styles and habits. Interviews were held with 140 individuals all on the cusp of retirement, who were then followed up over three years as they transitioned from workers to retirees.

One group expected to carry on after retirement much as they had been doing before. Some of these believed they were already living healthily enough but others, whilst acknowledging they were unhealthy, lacked the motivation to change.

A second group saw retirement as offering an opportunity to adopt healthier life-styles, with more time for exercise and to modify their eating habits. This group blamed their jobs as having had a negative influence on their health, depriving them of time and emotional energy to exercise or improve their diets. Retirement, they hoped, would mark a turning point.

Then there was a third group who feared the transition to retirement carried health risks, for example spending more time in the pub and social drinking, over-eating due to boredom, slowing down and vegetating. The extra time that retirement would give them could be a poisoned chalice, as they saw it

For many in this last group, far from offering opportunities to live more healthily, retirement would limit healthy agendas. For some, physical activity would be harder because they lived alone and would have to go out on wet, winter evenings whereas at work they had opportunities for exercise, cycled or had work mates with shared sporting interests.

One single woman aged 55 explained, “There is a park and there are canals, there are some walks, but that’s going to have to be me saying to myself, ‘Come on.’ Because I’m not going to have anyone else to spur me on... it’s going to be difficult.”

A married man aged 60 explained that all his former footballing companions had given up playing whilst the younger members of his family were all too busy. Retirement would put the kybosh on

his lunch time ‘footie’ games. Others mentioned the cost of sporting and leisure pursuits – could they afford the gym fees once they had retired?

The routines and structures of work can be a spur to remain active, but this only works for some people. My own life experience affirms this. I used to run the six miles into work a couple of times a week, whilst most of my colleagues sat in cars or on trains. Now, working from my home in South East London and not needing to trek in and out to the office daily, I find I am slower. I stick to the park and use the bike less. Keeping going is tough; I less stressed being away from the long-hours culture, but there are definite downsides.

Isolation is bad for you – there can be little doubt about this. The fit retiree needs others who are like minded, to act as a spur and a challenge. Expectations and resolve to work hard and stay fit may be influenced by the premature death of a close friend, encouraging the view that healthy living agendas are a waste of time and one might as well say, “Hang it all!” and live for the moment.

Public policies that encourage healthy living *throughout* life and ingrain good habits are, on the other hand, an obvious lever to healthy retirement. People whose health has suffered because of their work – we can think of lots of examples – demand our attention. According to the Westminster researchers, they are the most highly motivated to use retirement as a stepping stone to better health. Such motivation alone may not be sufficient. We all need *opportunities* – there is a great case for more resources to support senior sports and exercise programmes, not least the impact they could have on stretched NHS budgets, caring for older people who have aged and retired inactively.

For people who have spent their work lives coping with stress and ill health, retirement *may* be a turning point to live more healthily, but support for healthy living should surely start well before the retirement watch is handed out.

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