A celebration of life under the microscope

WELSH residents who have spent their lives under the microscope have been thanked for their efforts in a special 65th birthday celebration.

Since the day they were born back in 1946 they have been involved in a remarkable study that has followed them through the course of their lives – charting their progress and providing invaluable insight into how we change as we get older.

Throughout their lives they have been regularly weighed, scanned, measured and tested with their responses fuelling research that shaped modern thinking on many aspects of health care.

The National Survey of Health and Development (NSHD) and its study members are celebrating 65 years in 2011 and as part of that the Medical Research Council which runs the study has arranged thank you events for its participants across the UK.

Dewi Morgan from Swansea took part in the study and attended the launch of the Cardiff exhibition at the University Hospital of Wales (UHW) about the work.

Mr Morgan, a retired engineer, said he was glad to have been part of the study.

He said: “Two years ago we had a medical here at UHW for a whole day of doing tests.

“They asked if I wanted the results sent to my GP. I said yes. This is like a private health scheme that you have for nothing – the results of the medical were clear and my doctor has a great database about me to work from.”

Kenneth Lidster, who lives near Welshpool, has seen the benefits too. After a series of tests he was told he had high blood pressure. The discovery meant that action could be taken and he is now taking statins to help manage the condition.
The regular testing and probing has been part of life for both men.

Mr Morgan said that his mum, a nurse and midwife, had enrolled him in the study and that it was just a part of his life.

He said: “I think it was just a case of I was part of it. As I got to the age of knowledge I thought this was a good idea and there was no reason to drop out.

“In later life I was part of a research department so I know the value of proper data on which you can draw proper conclusions.”

Kate Craig, the Operational Director at the Clinical Research Facility (CRF) at UHW, and her team have helped gather the data.

She said: “We are extremely proud to have been one of five centres nationally involved in the latest data collection for the NSHD survey.

“Around 300 participants from Wales and the South West of England chose either to come to the CRF to undergo testing or opted for a home visit from one of the nurse team. This successful national collaboration demonstrates the ability of the UHB and School of Medicine staff to deliver high quality, robust data.”

Dr Graham Shortland, Interim Executive Medical Director, said: “Our work with the NSHD study is just one of many areas in which the UHB is helping to shape the future of medicine, working in close partnership with Cardiff University.

“This partnership brings together the joint resources of the UHB and the University for innovation and research and development to develop and modernise services to improve citizen health and well being.”

The study has followed 5,000 men and women across the UK born in the same week of March 1946.

It has revolutionised health and education policy and practice for over half a century. Launched less than a year after the end of the second world war and before the establishment of the NHS, key findings from the NSHD have provided the evidence base for widespread education and health reform.

The NSHD provided evidence to support calls to retain health visitor services by showing that social class differences seen in birth weight and infant survival persisted well into childhood.

It also demonstrated the importance of parents being involved in their child’s schooling by providing evidence that equally able children from poorer families had fewer educational opportunities. This contributed to government action to improve the quality of education, encourage better communication between schools and parents, and, ultimately the introduction of comprehensive education.
As the 65-year-old study members now enter retirement, newly collected data will provide evidence about health problems such as diabetes, high blood pressure, osteoporosis and mobility problems. In today’s ageing society, the new data will be crucial for those planning future social and health care services.

Three thousand participants still remain in the survey. A brand new MRC-supported birth cohort will follow in the footsteps of NSHD – drawing on findings from this baby-boomer study to learn more about child health and wellbeing in the 21st century.

Professor Diana Kuh, Director of the MRC Unit for Lifelong Health and Ageing which runs the NSHD, said: “The MRC 1946 ‘baby-boomer’ study is the jewel in the crown of life-long research studies.

“As the UK’s longest running study, we owe huge thanks to the study members whose dedication will benefit medical research and human health for many generations. The research would not have been possible without them, and I wish them a very happy 65th birthday.

“Cohort studies have a pivotal role in painting a picture of the health and wellbeing of society and are essential sources of data for a whole host of diseases and health challenges for the population today. The new data we are collecting provides unrivalled opportunities to extend the findings into the seventh decade and to understand how to maintain quality of life in the later years.”

The exhibition at the CRF in UHW will run until May 31st from 9am until noon and 2pm until 5pm.

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Notes for editors

Pictured left to right – Kenneth Lidster, CRF nurse Emma Howard and Dewi Morgan.

A number of other pictures are available from the event on request.

To learn more about the study visit www.nshd.mrc.ac.uk

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