

Occupational class trajectories in physical health functioning among ageing female employees

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Background Changing occupational class differences in health are poorly understood among ageing employees. We examined occupational class trajectories in physical health functioning among female employees facing retirement, and the contribution of work factors to these differences.

Methods The data derived from Helsinki Health Study baseline mail surveys in 2000-2002 (n=8960, response rate 67%) and follow ups in 2007 and 2012. 6528 female participants (ages 40-65) were included. Occupational classes were managers, semi-professionals, clericals and manual workers. Functioning was measured by the Short Form 36 physical component summary (PCS), with scores from 0 to 100 and higher scores indicating better health. Physical and mental strain of work and employment status were measured. Growth curves were estimated using mixed models.

Results Functioning declined by age in all occupational classes. At age 40 the PCS score for female managers was 52.5 (95% confidence interval 51.9-53.2) and for manuals 50.7 (49.6-51.7). At age 60 the scores were 48.0 (47.1-48.9) and 41.3 (39.8-42.8), with a gap widening from 1.8 to 6.7 scores. Adjusting for strain of work had minor effects on the class trajectories in functioning. For those who remained employed the trajectories were similar, but the class gap was slightly narrower. For those who retired the class gap was very large but narrowed by age.

Discussion Among female employees facing retirement age physical functioning was the better the higher the occupational class. Functioning declined in all occupational classes but the pace was the faster the lower the class, leading to a widening class gap towards age 65. Strain of work had only minor effects on the class trajectories in functioning, whereas early retirement led to a wide but narrowing class gap over age.

Conclusion Workplace measures are needed to prevent declining physical functioning among ageing female employees in general and among lower class employees in particular.