

MARITAL, EDUCATIONAL, EMPLOYMENT, INCOME AND GENERAL FINANCIAL STATUS PRIOR TO AND ONE TO SIX YEARS POST-SPINAL CORD INJURY*

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ABSTRACT OF PAPER

VARIOUS changes in selected social characteristics occurring over time among a population of traumatically injured spinal cord individuals have been observed by us. These characteristics include marital status, level of education, type of employment, amount of income, and general financial ability. The data were obtained primarily from direct interviews conducted at three intervals. Although the first interview was administered at definitive acute care hospital discharge, the information obtained was relevant to the time of injury. Utilizing the status of these characteristics, together with sex and age at time of injury as baseline data, changes were measured at 12 to 18 months and again at two to six years following injury. While there were slight variations in the three interview samples, approximately 83 per cent of respondents were male and 17 per cent were female. At the time of the first interview, the mean age was 30.3 years and the median age was 23 years.

The social characteristics of this population at the time of their respective injuries were quite diversified, but generally can be said to be rather 'average'. Most of the changes observed at 12 to 18 months following injury appear to represent a somewhat less severe impact upon life-style than what might be expected over this time period. The greatest changes were found to be a decline in the number of persons employed at this time and a corresponding increase in the proportion who reportedly were retired or unemployed. In addition, a decrease in total gross monthly income was evident. Given these general findings, it seems likely that the full impact of traumatic spinal cord injury upon this study population had not yet been felt and that approximately 1 year post-injury was too soon for the valid measurement and assessment of such changes.

More extensive changes in the social characteristics of this population become evident some two to six years following injury. Surprisingly, however, the social impact of traumatic spinal cord injury continues to appear less severe than one would intuitively expect. With regard to marital status, the largest proportion at each interview were 'single, never married', while the second proportion consistently were married at the time of the interview. The number of divorces more than doubled by two to six years post-injury. Educational attainment was good at two to six years after injury, with a decrease in the proportion having completed only grade school or high school, and a corresponding increase of those having finished one or more years of college or graduate level education by this time.

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Employment, after decreasing at 1 year post-injury, improved with changes in the types of employment showing a general 'upgrading' of job levels.* Although fewer were employed two to six years following injury than at the time of injury, this latest number had increased over that found at 12 to 18 months post-injury. The substantial increase in individuals found to be retired or unemployed at 12 to 18 months after injury remained virtually the same at the later study. Of those reportedly employed at the time of the last interview, three-quarters worked full-time (40+ hours weekly) and 13 per cent had more than one job.

The decrease in total gross monthly income seen at 12 to 18 months post-injury improved at two to six years following injury. There was also a decline in those individuals who had no income. However, only 32.8 per cent of respondents reported an increase at two to six years post-injury in their total gross monthly income when identified by use of dollar amount ranges. The majority of respondents (56.3 per cent) remained in the same category of the range scale. It may thus be that although the level of education and job status had generally improved for many study participants, income, regardless of source(s), had not increased accordingly.

Measurement of the general financial status indicated deterioration over time with proportionally fewer respondents being able to save money and more merely breaking even or being in debt at the end of each month. This could be the result of the high level of inflation that was present during the period of the study. When comparing themselves financially to others there was a steady decrease over time in the proportion considering themselves 'better off' or 'about the same', and a corresponding increase of those who thought they were 'worse off'.

The findings reported here indicate that the social impact of spinal cord injury, according to the measurements used and within the length of time under investigation, is surprisingly less severe than one would hypothesise. However, only further study can determine whether this continues over the longer term.

* The employment classifications used in this study have been adapted from August deB. Hollingshead and Frederick C. Redlich, *Social Class and Mental Illness* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1958), pp. 66-136.

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