Mental health in older rural Australian women

Richard Hockey¹, Libby Holden¹, Deirdre McLaughlin¹, Christina Lee², Annette Dobson¹, Julie Byles³, Gita Mishra¹

¹School of Population Health, The University of Queensland, ²School of Psychology, The University of Queensland, ³Research Centre for Gender, Health and Ageing, University of Newcastle

Introduction: Although older adults generally report lower rates of depression than younger adults, there are conflicting findings regarding urban–rural differences in psychological distress in older adults. Previous research has shown that older women are more likely to be widowed and to have limitations in physical functioning; older rural women may also experience difficulties accessing appropriate health and social support. Older rural women could therefore be more vulnerable to psychological distress.

Methods: Participants were drawn from the 1921–1926 birth cohort of the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women’s Health (n=12 432) who were aged 70–75 when recruited in 1996. The main variables used were: psychological distress as measured by the Mental Health Index (MHI) of the SF-36 scoring less than 52; area of residence classified as major cities, inner regional, outer regional and remote/very remote; sociodemographics; physical functioning; and social support. General estimating equation models were used to estimate the independent effects of each of the variables on the proportion with MH <52 over the course of the study (15 years).

Results: After adjustment for other factors older women residing in inner regional, outer regional, and remote/very remote areas were found to have significantly better mental health compared to women in major cities as measured by MHI <52 (ORs 0.90[0.82–0.99], 0.85[0.77–0.99], 0.66[0.46–0.95]).

Conclusions: Older women living outside major cities have significantly better mental health. This advantage is greater in the remote/very remote areas. They may be a more resilient group.