

Cardiovascular: Marriage rows that damage your heart

In a previous article (In Sickness and in Health Newsletter No. 2 December 2005) we discussed how researchers had been able to demonstrate that marital stress slowed down the healing rate of wounds. It would seem, however, that impact of matrimonial stress on the body maybe even more widespread.

New research from the University of Utah, USA indicates that arguing between partners can have an adverse affect on heart health. The research team, led by Professor Tim Smith, studied 150 married couples, with at least one partner in their sixties. None had ever been diagnosed with cardiovascular disease and participants were scanned to check for signs of disease.

Each couple was asked to “discuss” a subject that caused disagreement between them. The couples were then videoed while the discussions took place, watched by psychology students. Given the rather unreal environment in which the “disagreements” occurred, the researchers assumed that the exchanges between partners were “toned down” versions of what would actually happen at home. The research team coded the comments made by the couples as friendly, hostile, submissive, dominant or controlling.

The results showed that the type of comments made and who they were made by affected what happened to the

heart. Wives who made the most hostile comments during the discussion had a greater degree of calcification, indicating that plaque was building up in the arteries that supply blood to the heart. Particularly high levels of calcification were found in women who behaved in a hostile and unfriendly way and who were interacting with husbands who were also hostile and unfriendly.

The research team also found that husbands who displayed more dominant or controlling behaviour, or whose wives displayed such behaviour, were more likely than other men to have more severe hardening of the arteries.

Although the evidence from this study adds further weight to the theory that the state of our close personal relationships and our emotional well being may have a bearing on our heart health, further research is needed to try and establish exactly why this should be so.

References:-

BBC Health Marital rows harm heart health 4.3.2006

See also “Be happy – it’s good for your heart” (Inner Age Newsletter No.4 April 2006) which discusses related issues.