

## BOOK REVIEW

### History of the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles. Wellcome Witnesses to Twentieth Century Medicine, Volume 41

Overy C, Reynolds LA, Tansey EM (eds). London, UK: Queen Mary, University of London, 2011. ISBN-13: 978-0-90223-874-9. Pages: 115. Price: freely available as a PDF online at [http://www.history.qmul.ac.uk/research/modbiomed/Publications/wit\\_vols/57109.pdf](http://www.history.qmul.ac.uk/research/modbiomed/Publications/wit_vols/57109.pdf)

The history of the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (NATSAL) is fascinating. We now have good information on sexual behaviour – sexual orientation, partnership status, sexual attitudes and sexual activity, as well as an improved understanding of risk behaviours. We take such information for granted. This small volume is the transcript of a Wellcome Trust Witness Seminar (2009) and it brings to life the history of this research, the views and the frustrations of many of the key people involved in the NATSAL studies. The advent of AIDS and the discovery

of HIV in the 1980s and the knowledge that this was a blood-borne virus that could be acquired through sexual contact prompted the need to know more about sexual behaviour. NATSAL provides this information through its surveys carried out in 1990, 2000 and 2010 and is the largest scientific study of sexual behaviour since Kinsey's in the 1950s and 1960s. It has been pivotal in our improved understanding of sex and sexual behaviour and underpins the National HIV and Sexual Health Strategy, the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy and the National Chlamydia Screening Programme in England.

As well as discussing the development, history and findings of the NATSAL studies, the publication conveys the huge difficulty there was in the 1980s to obtain funding for anything to do with sex and reminds us of the bureaucracy and political implications that surrounded this research. Many readers will remember the 1989 article in *The Sunday Times* on 'Thatcher halts survey on sex'.<sup>1</sup> Eventually funding was provided by The Wellcome Trust and later also by the Medical Research Council and the Economic and Social Research Council.

The third survey initiated in 2010 builds on the previous research but includes an extended age range and enhanced biological measures of both sexually transmitted infections and sex hormones; it also contains general health questions, to find out how health affects sexual behaviour as people age. The results of this latest survey will be published in 2013.

This publication is well worth a read if you want to understand the history and difficulties encountered in developing and delivering this most important research whose findings have influenced all the services in which we work.

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## Reference

- 1 **Durham M**, Hughes D. 'Thatcher halts survey on sex.' *The Sunday Times*, 10 September 1989.