Some years ago I worked with a man who bought wholesale from a Jewish trader in London. A prominent sign in the warehouse stated ‘In God we trust, others pay cash!’ Trust, whether in God or other human beings, is back on the scientific agenda.

Trust is essential in many areas of life not least in the money markets. Science reporter Ken Grimes says, ‘Trust is one of the most powerful factors affecting a country’s economic health. Where trust is low, individuals and organizations are more wary about engaging in financial transactions’.

What is less known, and is now the subject of research, is that trust also affects the health of individuals. Although not yet positively identified, it appears that a reproductive hormone – oxytocin – may play a role in mediating the health benefits of trust. It could be responsible for the ‘feel-good’ factor that comes from exhibiting trust and finding that trust satisfied or rewarded.

Studies have shown that human beings reacting to other human beings with trust have increased brain activity in an area of the brain described as Brodman’s Areas 8 and 10 (areas associated with the pre-frontal cortex nearest the brain stem), and is not found in our interactions with, say, computers.

A World Values Survey indicates that levels of trust may be culturally determined. It is said, for example, that ‘Scandinavians feel lower levels of “stranger danger” than other nationalities’. Lifestyle factors may directly effect oxytocin levels, a range of factors as diverse as eating particular food items; air quality; and other recognized feel-good activities, such as sex, all having an influence.

The World Bank, interested in trust from the economic view, has been a player in the research. Steve Knack, from the Bank, has raised one controversial area in the trust debate. He says there is a negative correlation between trust and religious belief, and explains, ‘Lack of trust in other people increases the need for religious faith. If you can’t rely on others, you have to rely on a higher power’. So perhaps the Jewish warehouseman was on to something after all!

In fairness to those who hold a religious faith and trust in God, it is really too soon for Knack to be making such definitive statements. Research into trust has a long way to go before such conclusions can be drawn.

Brain scans show that the reward centers of the brain light up when people cooperate. It simply highlights what we have always known subjectively: it feels good to trust and be trusted, and that has a knock-on effect for our total health and well-being. Trust breeds trust, so trusting is not a spectator sport. It’s in at the deep end, trust me!