

Tackling Indigenous smoking in rural and remote Australia: progress and possibilities

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Indigenous Australians can expect to live 10-17 years less than other Australians and experience more than twice the burden of disease. A large part of the disease burden is due to high rates of chronic diseases. In 2012-13, 41.6% of Indigenous Australians over the age of 15 smoked, more than 2.5 times the rate of the non-Indigenous population. The health effects of tobacco use are well known, with smoking among Indigenous Australians contributing to chronic disease and responsible for one in five Indigenous deaths.

Indigenous Australians living in rural and remote areas are also more likely to smoke. Half of Indigenous Australians living in remote areas smoke in comparison to 38% of those living in major cities. This difference is largely accounted for by the higher proportion of youth that smoke. However, there is significant potential for change with smoking the number one preventable cause of death and disease in Australia.

In 2009-10, the Tackling Indigenous Smoking Program was launched with the aim of reducing smoking, chronic disease and early death among Indigenous Australians. The national program: established and trained a national network of Regional Tobacco Coordinators, Tobacco Action Workers and Healthy Lifestyle Workers within existing organisations; enhanced national Quitline services to be more culturally appropriate; funded training, including brief intervention training for people working with Indigenous Australians nationwide; implemented local and national social marketing campaigns, including Break the Chain; and included research projects, such as the Menzies Talking about the Smokes project.

Since the Tackling Indigenous Smoking Program commenced, our communities have responded to national and local tobacco control efforts with significant reductions in smoking rates among Indigenous Australians reported in the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey and many lessons learnt along the way. In the 2014-15 Budget, the Australian Government announced that they would continue to focus on improving the prevention, detection and management of chronic disease, while commissioning an independent review the Tackling Indigenous Smoking Program to ensure the program is implemented efficiently and in line with the best available evidence. These findings will help ensure the community receives appropriate support in not taking up smoking, quitting and remaining smoke free. This presentation will discuss some of the reviews key findings, outcomes and recommendations to improve health outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people nationwide.