

Research reveals decline in Indigenous heavy smokers

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The number of Indigenous heavy smokers has fallen significantly according to a study by the Menzies School of Health Research.

Associate Professor David Thomas has found the number of Indigenous smokers, who smoked more than 20 cigarettes per day, declined from 17.3% in 1994 to 9.4% in 2008 — a relative 45% reduction.

Although it's been known that the number of Indigenous smokers has decreased in recent years, Assoc Prof Thomas examined Australian Bureau of Statistics figures to determine whether Indigenous smokers were also smoking fewer cigarettes.

Assoc Prof Thomas said the findings, published in the 5 November issue of the Medical Journal of Australia, would encourage those working on national tobacco control programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

“With nearly half of Indigenous adults smoking and one-in-five Indigenous deaths due to smoking, this reduction in heavy smoking, together with earlier reports of the decreasing prevalence of smoking, is good news,” he said.

“Smoking causes more damage at higher doses so reducing smoking intensity as well as prevalence will lead to reduced deaths and illness due to smoking.

“Encouragingly, these declines occurred in both men and women, in remote and non-remote areas, and across all age groups with the exception of older age groups.”

Assoc Prof Thomas said interestingly these changes had all occurred prior to the substantial increase in government attention and resources for Indigenous tobacco control.

“While there was little targeted public health activity to reduce Indigenous smoking in the study period, Indigenous people may have been affected by the mainstream National Tobacco Campaign (1997-2005) and its increases in cigarette prices, social marketing campaigns, smoking bans, and restrictions on tobacco industry marketing,” he said.

Assoc Prof Thomas' research also found that the percentage of people smoking between one and ten cigarettes per day increased from 16.8% in 1994 to 21.6% in 2008 — a relative 29% increase.

“Indigenous tobacco control programs should make sure they include activities that focus on second-hand smoke and smoke-free policies which are likely to be effective with light smokers who may not even think of themselves as smokers.”

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Background

Menzies School of Health Research is a national and Asia-Pacific leader in tropical health research. It is the only medical research institute in the Northern Territory. Menzies has more than 300 staff and students working in central northern and central Australia, as well as low and middle-income countries across the Asia-Pacific region. Menzies is also a significant contributor to health education and research training in tropical Australia and neighbouring countries.