

Researcher brings Indigenous gambling and smoking into focus with funding boost

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The hundreds of communities nationwide that suffer the detrimental social and health effects of gambling and smoking will benefit from new research out of the Menzies School of Health Research (Menzies).

Menzies senior research fellow, Dr Matt Stevens, has recently been awarded an Early Career Fellowship by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), valued at \$304,596 as part of the latest round of NHMRC funding.

The fellowship funds Dr Stevens for four years to apply approaches to reducing tobacco use and minimising harms associated with commercial and non-commercial gambling in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population.

Dr Stevens said amongst the broader spectrum of gambling in Indigenous populations, community card gambling continued to cause significant health and social problems in remote communities, though there is very little current research that informs policy and programs aimed at reducing gambling-related harms in communities.

“To address this, a focussed study aimed at understanding the associations between community card games, money and mobility in remote Indigenous communities will be undertaken,” he said.

“Findings from this research will inform counselling services, gambling policy and public education campaigns centred around community card gambling.”

Several inter-related projects will cover: regulation and legislation, surveillance and evaluation, prevention and education, and treatment and screening.

Dr Stevens said the advantage of applying this comprehensive public health approach is that the focus is on the population, rather than the individual, which has been shown to have the greatest effect.

“Within the Indigenous population traditional approaches to health care are often perceived as blaming the individual, which may lead to feelings of shame when a person has difficulty controlling their gambling or smoking behaviour for example,” he said.

“Harms associated with gambling affect the individual, their family and the broader community in which they live in and include financial hardship, criminal activity, witnessing violence, being verbally and physical abused and increased transmission of infectious diseases in children living in homes where gambling problems occur.”

Dr Stevens’ gambling research program includes Indigenous and general population research and uses national survey data, collecting information directly through quantitative data collection and interviews, and reviewing gambling policy in Australia and internationally.

“Gambling has been found to affect Indigenous populations in Canada and New Zealand disproportionately compared with non-Indigenous populations,” he said.

“It is hoped that we can use effective policy approaches from these countries to reduce gambling-related harms in Australia. It is important that policy responses be implemented that are effective for the Indigenous population.”

Dr Stevens said reducing the social and health impacts of smoking and gambling remained an ever-present challenge in Closing the Gap.

“A national survey of tobacco use is currently underway, which will provide valuable information on which types of cessation programs are most effective in reducing smoking in the Indigenous population,” he said.

Recently implemented NT Government legislation which requires outlets selling tobacco to provide data on sales will be used to monitor tobacco sales across the NT, and will provide baseline data that can be used to assess the impact of smoking policy aimed at reducing tobacco consumption.

Dr Stevens’ findings will inform Commonwealth, state and territory governments on the effectiveness of tobacco control policy, as well as providing practical information for non-government organisations.

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Menzies Background

Menzies School of Health Research is Australia’s only Medical Research Institute dedicated to improving Indigenous health and wellbeing. We have a 28-year history of scientific discovery and public health achievement. Menzies works at the frontline, partnering with over 60 Indigenous communities across Northern and Central Australia. We collaborate to create resources, grow local skills and find enduring solutions to problems that matter.