

THE EVALUATION OF NORTHERN TERRITORY'S SMOKE-FREE PRISON POLICY: SUCCESSES AND UNEXPECTED RESULTS

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An evaluation of the Northern Territory's smoke free prison policy has been published today in the online journal, Public Health Research & Practice.

In 2013, the Northern Territory (NT) became Australia's first jurisdiction to introduce a smoke-free policy for all correctional facilities. The policy intended to promote healthy lifestyles and protect non-smoking prisoners, visitors and staff from second-hand smoke.

Researchers at Darwin's Menzies School of Health Research (Menzies), Marita Hefler and Associate Professor David Thomas, worked in collaboration with Northern Territory Department of Correctional Services to evaluate the effectiveness of the smoke free policy.

The overall implementation of the policy was considered a success, with no riots or major incidents reported. This was credited to a comprehensive communication and awareness campaign with a long lead-in time.

"The extensive communication strategy meant all stakeholders had time to become aware of and understand the policy. This contributed to a culture of change well before the policy was in action resulting in a smooth transition," Ms Hefler said.

"The largely problem-free transition in the NT undoubtedly made it easier for other jurisdictions to follow. Queensland was the first state to follow the NT in 2014, followed by Tasmania, Victoria and New South Wales in 2015. Smoke-free prisons are now the majority in Australia."

Prisoners have historically been a group with the highest smoking rates but the NT experience has shown that it is possible to change this.

Both prisoners and staff reported being surprised with how well it went with many prisoners, who were initially against the ban, pleased by the opportunity to give up. Many prisoners serve short sentences so supporting people to stay smoke free on release is the next priority.

One unintended consequence of the policy was misuse of Nicotine Replacement Therapy (NRT) patches, with some prisoners trading and smoking the patches.

"Although NRT provision is based on standard smoking cessation guidelines, and was initially an appropriate risk-minimisation strategy, it became the most problematic aspect of what was a largely problem-free implementation.

"NRT misuse is a key finding for correctional jurisdictions to consider when planning smoke-free facilities," Ms Hefler said.

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