

Tobacco—more deaths for the disadvantaged

December 23 2015, by Kerry Faulkner, Sciencenetwork Wa



77 per cent of the homeless and 32 per cent of those with a mental illness use tobacco. Credit: Chuck Grimmett

More must be done to help low socio-economic groups stop smoking and close the vast gap in life expectancy between them and those who can afford current support.

It was estimated the seriously mentally ill die 25 years earlier than the general population with smoking related conditions including heart disease, cancer and chronic respiratory disease the leading cause, according to University of Newcastle academic Professor Billie Bonevski who was speaking in Perth late last year.

For example, an obese 56-year-old Caucasian man, had been in and out of hospital for more than a decade with various health problems like

depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, stimulant dependency and medication abuse.

However, he died from [pulmonary emphysema](#) complications as a result of his two-pack-a-day [nicotine addiction](#) which he had tried repeatedly to quit with little help from [health care providers](#).

"Health providers were well aware he had a nicotine addiction. Other mental health and drug use problems were prioritised but it was the tobacco that killed him," Prof Bonevski says.

"This is typical unfortunately of many of our smokers now."

Australia arguably has the best tobacco control policy setting in the world but access to support is inequitable, according to Cancer Council WA director Terry Slevin.

As a result, the 'tobacco disparity' between the number of smokers from high socio-economic groups quitting and those on low incomes is increasing.

Who has the highest risk?

While tobacco use in Australia's general population is 13 per cent, recent figures show in WA the Goldfields-Mid West region has highest percentage of smokers (26 per cent) followed by Bentley and Armadale (20 per cent).

Staggering national figures show the following demographics use tobacco;

- 93 per cent of Australians who are drug and alcohol dependent
- 77 per cent of the homeless

- 32 per cent of those with a mental illness
- 78 per cent of prisoners
- 30 per cent of single parents

Prof Bonevski says Australia's national policy target for smoking is 10 per cent by 2018.

"It will probably get down to five per cent by next year which is remarkable," she says.

"But with low socio-economic groups, even by 2030 we will not have achieved a 10 percent smoking rate if the gradient of the slope continues to remain the same."

"Even if you give them all these evidence based treatments and they are really keen to quit, they then go home to these communities where [smoking](#) is an accepted part of social life."

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