

Deaths preventable if reach of asthma medicines increased

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Around the world an estimated 1,000 people a day die of asthma related conditions, with some 340 million affected by this common chronic disease.

In New Zealand more than 521,000 people are taking medicines for asthma – one in nine adults and one in seven [children](#). It causes a death here every week.

World Asthma Day is marked on 1 May, and internationally, medical professionals and researchers are taking the opportunity to draw attention to this too common chronic disease. It can be found in every country but has particularly harsh consequences in places where people have limited access to medicines because they cost too much are not prescribed, or are not available in pharmacies.

Professor Innes Asher of the University of Auckland is the Chair of the Global Asthma Network and received an ONZM in 2012 for her work in paediatrics. In 2017 she was appointed by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as an Expert on Chronic Respiratory Diseases.

She heads the international work of the Global Asthma Network that is aiming to better understand the impact of asthma around the world, involving 353 centres in 135 countries. Phase I of the Global Asthma Network is underway, involving children in primary and secondary schools and their parents. Its aim is to better understand how common and severe asthma is, how it is being managed, and what the risk factors are. The results of this study will become available in 2019.

"Asthma affects people of all ages in all parts of the world. Symptoms can include significant difficulty in breathing, which makes ordinary activities extraordinarily hard. It affects daily life like going to school, working at a job, looking after children or aging parents, exercising, or even just walking," Professor Innes says.

"There are high costs of poorly controlled asthma, including for acute treatment at the doctor, health centre or hospital, lost productivity of people with asthma or parents of children with asthma, and lost

education of children who are too unwell to attend school. This amounts to billions of dollars lost to society."

In New Zealand, more than 3,000 children each year are being admitted to hospital with asthma, and some of these will have had a potentially life-threatening attack. Across all age groups, hospitalisation rates are much higher for Pacific peoples (3.1 times higher) and Maori (2.4 times higher) than for other ethnic groups. Asthma costs New Zealand around \$800 million each year.

Professor Asher says the good news is that asthma can be treated, as there are essential asthma medicines of proven benefit, but without medicines, [people](#) are more likely to be disabled or die from it.

"It is vital that governments continue to develop coherent policies to enhance access to effective asthma medicines. Health leaders must aim to get essential asthma medicines included on the World Health Organization's List of Prequalified Medicinal Products have them on all national essential medicines lists, and have these medicines quality-assured, available and affordable in all countries."

"The Global Asthma Network, established in 2012, is working worldwide to reduce the burden of [asthma](#) through improving management, research, surveillance and capacity building and strives to achieve global access to quality-assured essential medicines."

Provided by University of Auckland

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