

Tobacco Use in Pacific Peoples - Are we doing enough?

Dr Colin Tukuitonga

Tobacco is the single largest preventable killer of Pacific Peoples in Aotearoa/New Zealand and the in Pacific region. In Aotearoa/New Zealand, smoking rates are higher in Pacific peoples (37%) and Māori (45%) compared with other New Zealanders (21%). Significant variation also exists in tobacco use among young people. A recent review of tobacco smoking in Pacific Islands Countries and Territories (PICTs) showed that smoking prevalence ranges from 22% - 57% in males and 1% - 51% in females.

Ethnic, gender and age group differences in tobacco use require better information about similarities and differences that exist within Pacific populations to enable more effective interventions to be developed. A review of major population-level tobacco control interventions in Aotearoa/New Zealand showed a lack of evidence of what works among Pacific Peoples. Continued reliance and adaptation of mainstream tobacco control interventions is unlikely to reduce tobacco use among Pacific Peoples in Aotearoa/New Zealand. More specific programmes for Pacific Peoples are urgently needed, with particular focus on young men. Effective interventions to reduce tobacco-related deaths will substantially reduce health inequalities in the country. Pacific communities need to be resourced and supported to own and participate more effectively in the provision of tobacco control programmes.

In the Pacific region, ratification of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control provides a golden opportunity to scale-up tobacco control efforts in the region. Despite these promising developments, political will varies widely in the region and more effective actions are needed. Control on trade in tobacco is an urgent priority addressing both the supply and demand of tobacco products in the region. Aotearoa/New Zealand needs to curb the supply of tobacco (worth about \$5 million per annum) to 12 small island states. Pressures to include tobacco and alcohol in the Pacific Free Trade Agreements should be resisted. Similarly, better regulatory controls are needed to control the marketing and sponsorship of sporting and recreational events by the tobacco industry. Local communities in the region should be supported to take action at the local level e.g. smoke-free villages in Fiji and Samoa. Traditional methods of social control are often more effective than legal measures.

This presentation will discuss interventions needed to prevent tobacco-related diseases and protect the health of Pacific Peoples in Aotearoa/NZ and actions needed within NZ to control tobacco use in the region.