Helping Australia’s most disadvantaged people to quit smoking

Some of Australia’s most disadvantaged groups, including homeless people, people living with a mental illness and people who are dependent on drugs or alcohol could be receiving greater support to quit smoking, said the Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA).

New research in the Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health shows that disadvantaged people are often interested in quitting smoking, but sometimes lack the necessary emotional and practical support to do so. A study of affected populations found that individual smokers perceived their doctors to be the best source of support for quitting.

Professor Simone Pettigrew, a co-author of the study confirmed the findings saying, “Smoking rates are significantly higher among these groups, and while they are often aware of the risk which smoking poses to their health, they are less likely to have success in quitting than other people.”

“The study found that doctors were seen by disadvantaged people as the best providers for emotional and practical support in quitting smoking – particularly when there was an established relationship of trust between them and their patient.”

The study also showed that in some instances doctors and community services providers who work with disadvantaged people were less likely to recommend they quit smoking if they thought it would be too much of a burden to the individual or exacerbate their existing health issues.

Terry Slevin, CEO of the PHAA and a co-author of the study commented, “There is sometimes a belief among some professionals that people who are already grappling with homelessness, addiction or poor mental health will be overwhelmed by attempting to quit smoking. It might also be viewed as the “one small pleasure” disadvantaged people have and a lower priority compared to other social or health challenges – however this is not the case.”

“The truth is that while smoking might be seen as a smaller issue that these individuals are facing, it actually feeds into their overall poor health and then continues an ongoing cycle of disadvantage, financial insecurity and lower employability.”

“Cigarettes are an unnecessary financial and health burden to those Australians who are already struggling a great deal,” he said.

“Service providers need to be assured of the importance of encouraging cessation and that many disadvantaged people do want assistance to quit. It’s also important they are equipped with the appropriate tools and knowledge to fully support their patients in quitting smoking. The lungs of all people are equally important to protect from the harms of tobacco – no matter individual circumstances.”

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