Asthma in Maori

Asthma mortality rates for Maori reduced significantly following the 1970-80s asthma epidemic years. However, available data indicates that asthma mortality continues to be higher in Maori and asthma hospitalisation rates remain disproportionately higher for Maori than for non-Maori.

HRC Post-doctoral Fellow, Dr Lis Ellison-Loschmann (Ngati Toarangitira, Te Atiawa, Ngati Raukawa and Ngai Tahu) has been delving into the figures as part of her work at Massey University’s Centre for Public Health Research in Wellington.

Following up the work of the Maori Asthma Review, completed in 1991, she has been looking at time trends in asthma mortality and hospitalisations.

The historical evidence has shown that asthma prevalence is similar in Maori and non-Maori children but that asthma morbidity is greater in Maori children. Beyond childhood though the two groups diverge further with asthma prevalence in Maori adults increasing as they get older, the opposite of non-Maori adults whose prevalence decreases with age.

“What that’s saying is that Maori are no more likely than non-Maori to develop asthma, but once they get it, it is more severe and tends to last longer.”

Meanwhile, analysis by ethnicity of the Wellington data for the International Study of Asthma and Allergies in Childhood (ISAAC), involving 6 to 7 year-olds and 13 to 14 year-olds, shows that asthma prevalence in Maori has now increased markedly, particularly amongst teenagers. These differences could not be explained by recognised environmental exposures such as family size or use of paracetamol.

The next step will be to analyse the ISAAC data for all of New Zealand to see whether this is a national phenomenon.

Dr Ellison-Loschmann has also followed up a group of Maori teenagers from the ISAAC study to look at factors affecting their asthma severity, quality of life and access to care.

“The study involved only small numbers but showed for the first time in a random sample that a significant number of students did have access problems and that this impacted on the severity of their asthma.”

Dr Ellison-Loschmann is now moving her focus to cancer research amongst Maori as part of her HRC Research Fellowship.

That work will include descriptive analyses of incidence, mortality and survival from cancer for Maori, and she will be involved as a co-investigator on studies looking at occupational cancer, gastric cancer and breast cancer. She will also collaborate on descriptive analyses of cancer in Pacific populations.

Her fellowship includes two years working overseas to develop her research skills in cancer epidemiology based at the Catalunya Institute of Oncology in Barcelona, Spain.

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