Stubbing out a mother’s health risk

Dr Alys Havard, Professor Louisa Jorm and Ms Deborah Randall from the Centre for Health Research along with Associate Professor David Preen, Dr Anna Kemp and Dr Kristjana Einarsdottir from the University of Western Australia and Professor Michael Daube from Curtin University are investigating the safety of medications for quitting smoking during pregnancy. This National Health and Medical Research Council project also explores inequities in the use and effectiveness of such medicines, both before and during pregnancy, among disadvantaged communities, notably Aboriginal women, and any role played by changes in public policy.

‘Smoking during pregnancy has serious and far-reaching effects for both mother and child, and the risk of harm is particularly high among Indigenous women,’ says Dr Alys Havard. ‘The rates of smoking during pregnancy among Indigenous women are three times those of non-Indigenous mothers; the likelihood of quitting smoking during pregnancy is much lower; and the number of heavy smokers is disproportionately high.’

The researchers will examine records for about 1.2 million births, linking routine midwifery data for all women who gave birth in NSW and Western Australia between 2003 and 2012 with prescription records and other health service use. This time period includes the introduction (in 2009) of subsidised nicotine replacement therapies (NRT) for Indigenous smokers so the project will explore the use and health outcomes of NRT during pregnancy.

Clinicians, government representatives and Indigenous communities will be involved in all stages of the research, by way of a specially convened reference group and input from Associate Investigator Professor Sandra Eades, an Indigenous researcher with considerable experience in maternal and infant health.

Smoking is the largest single cause of preventable death and disease in Australia, with the social costs highest among Indigenous Australians. Behavioural interventions alone are only marginally successful in promoting smoking cessation during pregnancy. This study is in line with national priorities to reduce inequalities in smoking-related illness and to achieve better health and wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The findings are expected to benefit the community by contributing to policy debates about how to reduce smoking rates during pregnancy among Indigenous and non-Indigenous mothers, and determine if maternal and infant health could be improved with greater or reduced access to cessation medications.

Project Title: Pharmacotherapy for smoking cessation during pregnancy and the inter-pregnancy period: a population-based cohort study.
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