

Indigenous health gap wider: report; Disease – Non-fatal conditions increase

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Indigenous Australians are losing 2.3 times the number of healthy years to death and disease than their non-Indigenous counterparts, according to new research by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

In an alarming finding, the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians has widened in some respects, in particular the health impact caused by domestic violence.

The AIHW report examined the total burden of disease on Indigenous Australians, combining the number of years lost to death with the number of healthy years lost to disease and disability.

In total, Indigenous Australians lost 284 years of healthy life for every 1000 people in 2011, either through premature death or living with disease and injury.

The overall burden of disease on Indigenous people fell by five per cent since 2003, with an 11 per cent decrease in the fatal burden but a four per cent increase in the non-fatal burden.

"This suggests a shift from dying prematurely to living longer with disease," said Fadwa Al-Yaman, head of the AIHW Indigenous and children's group.

Mental and substance use disorders accounted for 19 per cent of the total disease burden suffered by both male and female Aboriginal people. Injuries including suicide were the second-biggest factor for men (19 per cent), while for women it was cardiovascular disease (11 per cent), injuries (10 per cent) and cancer (10 per cent).

Altogether, mental and substance disorders, musculoskeletal conditions and respiratory disease accounted for two thirds of the non-fatal disease burden suffered by Indigenous Australians.

The non-fatal impact of injuries, mental and substance use disorders, respiratory diseases and endocrine disorders (including diabetes) actually increased since 2003, the report concluded.

Mental and substance issues played the biggest role in major cities, and had the smallest effect in remote and very remote Aboriginal communities. Injuries, including suicide, played the bigger role in remote communities.

More than a third of the overall disease burden could be prevented, the report found, with the five biggest risk factors tobacco use, alcohol, body mass, physical inactivity and high blood pressure.

Smoking and drinking factored into a number of the major causes of death and disability. "If we reduce smoking and alcohol use, we get multiple wins across the board," said Dr Al-Yaman.

She noted some of the report's findings were positive, including a "significant improvement" in the fatal burden caused by cardiovascular diseases. And for the most part, premature death was not simply being replaced by poor-quality life, she said.

But the improvement was not as fast as that enjoyed by the non-Indigenous population, which saw a 16 per cent decrease in the fatal burden over the same period.

Matthew Cooke, chair of the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, said he was appalled by the "unacceptable gap" in health outcomes.

284 years Indigenous Australians lost 284 years of healthy life for every 1000 people in 2011 Source: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare