

What About Passive Smoking ?

Yolanda Walker reports on a SNAICC campaign.

Whichever way you choose to look at it, smoking is a problem that most of society faces. Whether people have chosen to smoke or not, it seems that they have fallen victim to the health risks related to that lethal cigarette smoke.

The latest problem to corrupt our community, and even more so our children is passive smoking. Simply, the breathing of other people's cigarette smoke. Passive smoking produces health problems as well as irritation for the non-smoker as the smoke contains at least as many harmful chemicals as that which is directly breathed in by the smoker.

It is a very serious problem, especially for young children, asthma sufferers and people with heart and lung problems. Babies and young children who are passive smokers often suffer from illnesses such as:-

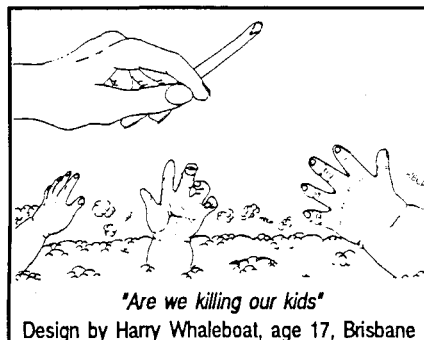
- asthma attacks
- ear, nose & throat problems
- poor lung function and slow lung growth
- chest infections, frequent coughs, colds and other respiratory illnesses such as pneumonia and bronchitis.

Up until now the issue of passive smoking has received very little profile throughout the Aboriginal community. The hazardous effects that passive smoking has had on children's health has only recently been brought into focus. It was therefore felt necessary for a project focussing on passive smoking and its effects on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to be developed. The Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) conducted an awareness campaign throughout 1992. The aim was to reduce the incidence of respiratory illnesses including asthma in young Aboriginal children caused by passive smoking. We feel that it is important that awareness amongst Aboriginal and Islander adults is established so that they know exactly

what their smoke is doing to their kids. This is a very important issue and consequently must be dealt with.

The overall objectives of the work that we are doing at SNAICC is to reduce the levels of morbidity amongst Aboriginal and Islander children caused by smoking; to develop awareness amongst Aboriginal and Islander people through awareness about adult smoking and child health.

The first step in a very long and tiresome process was to canvas communities in an attempt to develop culturally relevant resource materials. The idea is to produce materials which can be seen by Aboriginal and Islander people as their own and not part of the government campaign. After all this would be 'them' telling 'us' what to do all over again.



Travel to various Aboriginal communities has enabled me to establish just how far the level of awareness extends, and more importantly how aware the people actually are. The aim was to get people's opinions of the issues and then use their suggestions to create messages/slogans which will eventually be used on posters and stickers, and which will hopefully make people more aware of the potential harm to their own and other people's children. Non-judgemental publicity and other resource material will be produced which is accessible to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Field work consultation took place in chosen sectors throughout the country. This involved talking with different

people about the issue, getting different ideas from individuals in a group format to enhance discussions and sometimes even arguments! As a part of the field work, schools were also visited. This was done to get an age - wide perspective on the issue.

From this point, it is up to individual communities to decide for themselves whether or not they wish to utilise the resources they have, in order to create a community where the adults have come to terms with the health situation in the community and, as a result, have implemented some sort of strategy which puts the rights of their kids first. A start is smoke-free cars, smoke-free homes and simply just not smoking around kids. Adults have gone on too long smoking around children, if we try to end the problem now, the next generation of children can not only be smoke-free, but asthma-free, bronchitis-free, emphysema-free and maybe even lung cancer-free. Who knows ?

This project leaves me with no doubt that there is a need for future locally based and some specific nationally based campaigns to be established. This is necessary not only to achieve long term goals set out by SNAICC, but for the health of our children, who already suffer twice as much as children generally.

Aboriginal adults must take responsibility for their children's health problem. They are the lucky ones, they smoke by choice. Their children, however do not have this option. If the community becomes aware of this issue, the problems can be solved. We must stop thinking of ourselves so much, you can smoke... but not around kids because it's killing them.

SNAICC has now played a catalyst role in the passive smoking issue. It has given a kick - start to the issue on a national level within several Aboriginal communities. It is now up to others to take the initiative to create locally or nationally based campaigns within Aboriginal communities throughout Australia.