

Health and Wealth – Health Inequalities linked to Smoking

People living in different socio-economic environments face very different risks of ill health and early death, especially in relation to smoking. Those from more deprived communities have poorer short and long term health than those in better off communities.

In November 2007 the Government's Select Committee on Health launched an inquiry into Health Inequalities to examine the extent to which the NHS could help to reduce current patterns and recent trends in ill health and death by measures of socio-economic status.¹

Organisations and individuals were invited to submit written evidence to the inquiry by January 2008. Together Smokefree North West, Cancer Research UK and Heart of Mersey made a submission highlighting the links between tobacco use and health inequalities.² The full report, published in February 2009, declared smoking to be one of the biggest causes of health inequalities.³

Smoking is a major cause of lung cancer, cardiovascular disease and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). It can also contribute to or cause many other cancers, asthma and high blood pressure.

The link between smoking and health inequalities is particularly strong in the North West. A study focusing on Manchester and surrounding areas tested the idea that smoking is indeed more prevalent in deprived areas by investigating whether pubs in poorer areas had higher levels of particulate air pollution.⁴ This took place before the ban on smoking in enclosed places.

The study was carried out in Burnley, Bury, Blackburn and Manchester. The pubs were given an area-based deprivation score by mapping their postcode against set

criteria from the national census. Air quality was indeed found to be poorest in pubs situated in areas classified as more deprived.

In the North West Public Health Observatory report, 'Where Wealth means Health: Illustrating Inequality in the North West' (2006), the areas in the North West identified with the highest attributable deaths from smoking were Manchester, Liverpool and Knowsley.⁵ Those identified with the lowest were Macclesfield, South Lakeland and Eden. This was supported by data from the latest Local Health Profiles 2009.⁶

Number of annual smoking related deaths (per 100,000 population age 35+):

- Liverpool: 329.4
- Manchester: 330.2
- Knowsley: 322.6
- South Lakeland: 157.4
- Eden: 170.5

NB Macclesfield BC ceased to exist on 1st April 2009 and is now part of Cheshire East Council. No figures are available for Macclesfield from the Local Health Profiles 2009.

The report also illustrated that Liverpool, Manchester and Knowsley were areas of the North West with the lowest life expectancy at birth. In comparison Macclesfield, South Lakeland and Eden were those with the highest.

A paper by Dr Ruth Hussey, the Regional Director of Public Health, 'Our Life in the North West, 2008' compares the North West health trend with the rest of the UK.⁷ Despite good progress in action on health inequalities we are not living better in the North West with low life expectancy for both males and females and an infant mortality rate above the England average. The North West has some of the highest rates in England for deaths from heart disease and stroke and deaths from cancer and smoking related illnesses. The rate of adults who smoke in the North West at 25% is significantly higher than the England average of 22%.⁸

Interestingly, national data shows more affluent groups demonstrate the most consistent pattern of decline in smoking with deprived populations lagging behind; the opposite appears to be true in the North West. Analysis of data between 2003 and 2005 from the Health Survey for England and the General Household Survey

indicates the biggest drop in prevalence in the most deprived population with a small increase in affluent groups.^{9 10} **This indicates that the work already under way to help people from the poorest areas of the North West to stop smoking is having a positive effect.**

References

¹ Health Committee Press Notice No 3, New Inquiry - Health Inequalities, 27 November 2007
http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/health_committee/hcpn271107.cfm

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<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmselect/cmhealth/422/422we125.htm>

³ House of Commons Health Committee, Health Inequalities, Third Report of Session 2008–09

⁴ Levels of second hand smoke in pubs and bars by deprivation and food-serving status: a cross-sectional study from North West England, BMC Public Health, 2006
<http://www.biomedcentral.com/1471-2458/6/42/abstract>

⁵ Where Wealth means Health: Illustrating Inequality in the North West, North West Public Health Observatory, 2006
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⁶ Local Health Profiles 2009

⁷ Our Life in the North West, Dr Ruth Hussey, 2008
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⁸ Office for National Statistics, General Household Survey, 2006

⁹ Department of Health, Health Survey for England, 2003-05
http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/PublishedSurvey/HealthSurveyForEngland/DH_632

¹⁰ Office for National Statistics, General Household Survey, 2003-05
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