

ASTHMA AWARENESS AND EDUCATION IN THE 65+ AGE GROUP

S C Jones¹, D V Hall¹, K L Andrews¹, M St George², M Dephoff²

¹Centre for Health Behaviour and Communication Research, University of Wollongong NSW;

²Asthma Foundation of NSW, St Leonards, NSW

Purpose: There is considerable evidence that a large number of Australians aged 65 and over have undiagnosed, or poorly managed, asthma which results in significant morbidity and mortality (including reduction in daily functioning and quality of life). To date, the focus of asthma diagnosis and treatment has primarily been on children, and effective strategies for targeting older adults have not been developed or tested.

This collaborative research was undertaken by a team of university researchers and asthma support providers in the Illawarra area. It aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the beliefs, attitudes and knowledge of older Australians and their health care providers to inform the development of future evidence-based interventions that reduce the morbidity and mortality from asthma in this age group.

Methods: Focus groups with the target audience were conducted to explore their knowledge and skills with regard to asthma including: asthma symptoms, prevalence, prevention, diagnosis and treatment. Also discussed was their current or preferred source of advice, information and treatment for asthma. Participants for the focus groups comprised males and females over 65 years living independently in the community and were recruited from existing leisure and recreational networks for older people as well as retirement villages. In-depth interviews were also conducted with a broad range of health professionals and stakeholders in the area including general practitioners, asthma educators, pharmacists, aged care specialists and community nurses.

Results: Preliminary results indicated that older Australians were unaware of the prevalence of asthma in their age group, had limited understanding of the symptoms and treatments, and tended to associate the condition with children. Their main and preferred source of information regarding asthma was verbal advice from general practitioners and pharmacists, however they also identified television and magazines as potential information sources. Health professionals and stakeholders generally felt that older people had limited understanding of asthma and tended to accept or minimise respiratory symptoms as a natural part of ageing. They felt that, generally, older people did not consider asthma or ask about their symptoms until they experienced negative outcomes and that they tended to manage their asthma poorly. Health professionals and stakeholders identified general practitioners as credible spokespeople for older Australians but felt that this group tended to get health information from their peers or the mass media including television, newspapers and magazines.

Conclusion: These preliminary results indicate that there is a considerable gap in the knowledge and skills of older Australians in relation to asthma. These qualitative results will be further analysed and applied to a relevant behaviour change model - the Health Belief Model - to develop a set of guidelines and recommendations for effective communication strategies to target older Australians with regard to asthma.