



Media Release

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Many people with mental illness dying younger due to smoking not psychiatric conditions New national mental health plan finally addresses elephant in the room

The inclusion of physical health for the first time in a five-year national plan detailing priority areas for Australia's mental health system is a vital step toward improving lives, according to Quit Victoria.

Quit Victoria Director Dr Sarah White said people with mental illness were in far poorer physical health than other Australians, with much of the disease burden linked to high smoking rates. She said the Fifth National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Plan, which sets out a national approach for collaborative government effort over the next five years, encourages a greater focus on reducing important risk factors such as smoking.

The plan notes that compared with the general population, people living with mental illness are:

- 65% more likely to smoke;
- 50% more likely to have cancer;
- Twice as likely to have cardiovascular disease; and
- Twice as likely to have respiratory disease.

Dr White said smokers with mental illness were far more likely to die from their smoking than as a result of their psychiatric condition.

"The statistics are stark - Australian men with mental illness live 15.9 years less and women live 12 years less than those without mental illness, and most of the excess morbidity and mortality is attributable to smoking-related illnesses such as cardiovascular disease, respiratory disease, and cancer," Dr White said.

"Smokers often perceive their smoking to be helpful in relieving or managing psychiatric symptoms, such as feelings of depression, anxiety, and stress. However, recent evidence suggests that the reverse is true; quitting smoking for at least six weeks actually improves mental health, mood, and quality of life, both among the general population and among people with a psychiatric disorder."¹

VicHealth chief executive Jerril Rechter said empowering smokers with mental illness to quit was an important priority.

¹ Taylor G, McNeill A, Girling A, Farley A, Lindson-Hawley N, et al. Change in mental health after smoking cessation: Systematic review and meta-analysis. *British Medical Journal*, 2014; 348:g1151. Available from: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/24524926>



“Smokers with mental illness are just as motivated to quit as the general population, and can quit successfully. It’s vital that we don’t leave them behind in our efforts to reduce the preventable death and disease caused by smoking in our community,” Ms Rechter said.

Quit Victoria is working with five pilot sites on a project to embed smoking cessation into routine care for people with mental illness. This project has the strong support of NorthWestern Mental Health, which runs three of the sites at Epping, Broadmeadows and Sunshine. The other pilot sites are Orygen Youth Health and EACH.

Quit Victoria is a partnership between VicHealth, Cancer Council Victoria, the State Government of Victoria and the Heart Foundation.