



New quit smoking program needed

Adam Cresswell
Health editor

QUIT smoking programs targeting Aboriginal people may need to be redesigned, as evidence mounts that existing policies are failing to make a dent in sky-high smoking rates among pregnant indigenous women.

Researchers say that programs successful among non-indigenous people are having little to no impact in the Aboriginal community, because most of the programs take scant account of the social and cultural pressures keeping indigenous smoking rates high.

Studies suggest at least 50 per cent of pregnant Aboriginal women smoke during pregnancy, and some research indicates the rate could be as high as between 60 to 70 per cent.

Because smoking causes such a large slice of the health problems of Aboriginal people, experts say Australia will have little chance of closing the 17-year life expectancy gap between mainstream and indigenous societies if indigenous to-

bacco use is not reined in.

Lisa Wood, a research fellow in the University of Western Australia's school of population health, said a study she recently conducted showed pregnancy was "not such a blip on the long-term life radar" of Aboriginal women as it was for other women.

This meant that while non-indigenous women would usually treat pregnancy as an opportunity to re-order their lifestyles and adopt healthier habits, Aboriginal women — who often started having children as teenagers — were less likely to do this.

In a series of interviews with 40 indigenous Perth women and 10 Aboriginal health workers, Dr Wood and colleagues also found smoking was entrenched for a number of reasons.

These included the fact that most Aboriginal women regarded smoking as helpful for reducing their stress — which might be related to poor hous-

ing, or domestic violence issues.

Although most of the women recognised that second-hand smoke was unhealthy for their children, many regarded cutting down their tobacco use as a success in itself.

"Smoking, and quitting smoking, are quite low priorities," Dr Wood said. "Some of the women had partners, some were single mothers, some had partners in jail — many had difficult life circumstances.

"In that context, thinking about quitting is pretty low, if not off the radar altogether."

Fiona Stanley, director of the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, said Aboriginal health issues could not be addressed until their causes and context were understood.

"We have taken their land away, we have taken their kids away, we have denied them jobs and decent housing... and then we say 'by the way, don't drink or smoke, it's bad for you'."