

Encouraging young Western Australians to be *Smarter than Smoking*

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Ms Beal has worked at the Heart Foundation within the cardiovascular health team for 6 years, gaining experience in health sponsorship, physical activity and now tobacco control where she coordinates the development, implementation and evaluation of the Healthway funded Smarter than Smoking Project to reduce smoking prevalence among young Western Australians.

Project description

Smarter than Smoking (STS) is a state-wide, youth smoking prevention project. Established in 1995 and now in its sixteenth year, the project takes a comprehensive approach to reduce smoking among youth in Western Australia.

The project is funded by Healthway and implemented by the National Heart Foundation (WA Division only). It is one of the longest running, youth targeted tobacco control initiatives in Australia. The project communicates the short-term, negative consequences of smoking that are most relevant to young people.

The project's key messages aim to;

- reinforce the negative short-term and immediate effects of smoking
- challenge the socially acceptability and desirability of smoking
- reinforce that smoking is not the 'norm'
- educate young people—provide knowledge and skills to make informed choices conducive to a permanent smoke free lifestyle.

Objective

The Smarter than Smoking Project aims to prevent the uptake of smoking among young West Australians.

Target group

The project targets 10 to 15 year olds in Western Australia. This is an age when initial experimentation, continued trial of smoking and uptake is highest as young people make the transition to secondary school.

Within this age range, Aboriginal youth and young people living in low socio-economic and regional areas have been identified as priority target groups. Smoking is much more likely to occur among young people from the project's priority target groups, and young people from these groups are most at risk of taking up smoking. In particular, Aboriginal and lower SES youths are more likely to experience overt 'peer pressure' to try smoking as a result of who they live and mix with.

Young people from the priority target groups are also more likely to have family that smoke, have a greater financial burden due to their expenditure on tobacco and have less access and exposure to appropriate smoking prevention resources, messages and services.

Contributing to a decline in smoking prevalence among priority groups is an important focus for the project over the next three years.

Youth smoking prevalence in Western Australia

Smoking rates among WA youth aged 12-17 years are at an all time low of 4.8% (Australian School Student Drug and Alcohol Survey, 2008), a marked decline from 16% in 1996.

Despite this, young people continue to overestimate the proportion of adults and young people who actually smoke and the project must continue to challenge this misconception by young people and reinforce that *smoking is not the norm*.

Although youth smoking prevalence in Western Australia shows positive trends, smoking remains unacceptably high among disadvantaged and Aboriginal youth. Smoking rates among Aboriginal youth are three times higher than rates among non-Aboriginal youth (4.8%) with ASSAD data indicating that 15.7% of young Aboriginal school students aged 12-17 years are current smokers.

Methodology

The project implements a comprehensive mix of strategies to communicate key messages to young people.

Key strategy areas include:

- Mass media communications (includes the implementation of state-wide media campaigns and the development of television, radio, online and print media materials to be integrated across key strategy areas)
- School based education programs and resources (includes the provision of resources for teachers to use in the classroom, a small grants scheme for schools to apply for funds to implement smoking prevention initiatives and support for schools to provide cessation advice to students)
- Promotion of the Smarter than Smoking message through Healthway sports, arts and racing sponsorships including NetballWA, Football West, Barking Gecko, WA Opera, Awesome Arts, Speedway Association)
- Provision of youth oriented publications, merchandise and website (www.OxyGen.org.au)
- Advocacy to policies to reduce tobacco promotion, availability and affordability for young people
- Qualitative and quantitative research on young people and smoking including annual post campaign evaluation.

Evaluation and research

Comprehensive evaluation includes a combination of formative research and baseline and annual tracking surveys to examine changes in smoking prevalence, campaign awareness and attitudes towards campaign messages among the target group. Recent qualitative research indicates that young people are aware of the short-term, negative consequences of smoking and they now care more about long term consequences, their future and what they will become.

This research undertaken with young people in Perth, Bunbury and Port Hedland (n = 96 participants, 23 of these Aboriginal youth or 24%) will provide direction for the project's future communication and messaging objectives. Important information identified by the research includes;

- Having **friends** who smoke and/or who offer you a smoke remains a critical factor in smoking uptake
- Aboriginal and lower SES youths are more likely to experience **overt peer pressure** to try smoking as a result of who they live/mix with
- **Household influences** are important in helping reduce uptake and continuation of smoking e.g. parents approval of smoking has a strong correlation with smoking behaviour
- Regional youth were significantly more likely to have parents who smoked
- Control/addiction is still a relevant theme among young people

- Young people care about their future—long term consequences, defines who you are/what you will become

Results

Project results show positive shifts over time in smoking-related attitudes, intentions and behaviour. Independent national survey data also shows a significant decrease in smoking rates among 12 to 17-year-olds in WA, from 16% in 1996 to 4.8% in 2008.

Following the August 2010 STS media campaign, self-completion surveys were administered to students from 21 secondary schools in Western Australia. A total of 982 students aged 12 to 16 years were surveyed to measure attitudes and behaviours related to smoking.

Key results from the base-line survey to the 2010 post campaign evaluation in relation to changes in young people's attitudes and behaviours towards smoking include;

- There continues to be more 12 to 16 year olds who have never smoked in their life. Of young people surveyed, 84% claim to have never even had a puff on a cigarette—a significant increase from 40% in 1996.
- There has been a significant increase in young people saying that they will *not smoke at all ever* from 56% at base-line to 87% in 2010.
- In 2010, 81% of respondents thought it would be *easy* or *very easy* to resist smoking in the future, compared to 62% at base-line in 1996.
- In 2010, 94% of respondents stated that they don't want to end up a smoker, the highest level achieved by the project yet.

Conclusion

While youth smoking prevalence in Western Australia shows positive trends, smoking remains unacceptably high among indigenous and disadvantaged youth including those in regional areas. The project must work to reduce smoking prevalence among these priority groups in the future. Recent qualitative research has provided strong direction for future Smarter than Smoking campaign messaging and will facilitate the continuation of a distinct, innovative and credible, youth oriented campaign, with a significant focus on priority populations.

The challenge ahead is to incorporate research findings into new campaign materials to communicate relevant messages that reflect the current attitudes of youth. New and alternative approaches to reaching priority populations, particularly Aboriginal youth, must be implemented.