

CURRENT HEALTH INDICATORS

The NSW Health Department has released a report — Health in New South Wales: Current indicators — containing health information on NSW residents. The report has three main aims: 1) to enable readers to identify the key health problems of particular age groups without having to consult multiple data sources; 2) to stimulate efforts to improve current health indicators; and, 3) to focus further research on preventable illness and death.

Data in the report are derived from Australian Bureau of Statistics mortality data through 1988, the NSW Health Department's Inpatient Statistics Collection (1988/89), Infectious Disease Notification file (1990) and the 1983 Australian Health Survey. In addition to mortality, birth and perinatal mortality rates (health indicators used by WHO) the report includes rates for hospital admissions, reported episodes of illness and general practitioner visits and infectious diseases.

Mortality rates are the most widely used indicator of population health. People in NSW are living longer than before: in the past two decades the expectation of life increased by 4.5 years for both men and women. The average expectation of life at birth for men is 73 years and for women 79 years. This gender differential has been present since the turn of the century.

The cause of death is highly age-specific. The leading causes of death in NSW are circulatory diseases and cancer and almost three-quarters of such deaths occur among those aged 65 years and over. Accordingly, the report focuses on age and sex groups within the population.

Babies and children under five years form a special group. Great gains have been made in preventing foetal and neonatal deaths: the mortality rate fell from 59.4 per thousand births in 1936 to 12.5 in 1988. But the perinatal period remains the most hazardous: in 1988, most infants (aged less than one year) who died did so as a result of perinatal disorders, and most of the remainder as a result of congenital anomalies and ill-defined conditions. Perinatal disorders also accounted for 19 per cent of hospital admissions of babies and children under five years. Respiratory problems were the major cause and diarrhoea and other gastro-intestinal tract problems caused a further 10 per cent.

Injury was the major cause of death among children over one year, adolescents and adults under 25 years. Motor vehicle accidents were the largest cause of injury but suicides and other causes of injury, such as falls, made sizeable contributions to the injury mortality rate. For all the age groups the male rate

far exceeded that for females. Not surprisingly, injury was also the leading cause of hospital admission in these age groups.

Cancer emerged as an important cause of death after the age of 25 years: in the age group 25-44, cancer caused 23 per cent of deaths, in the group 45-64 years 39 per cent, and in those over 64 years 22 per cent. But cancer accounted for only 10 per cent and 11 per cent of hospital separations in the two older age groups.

Cardio-vascular disorders became an increasingly important cause of death and hospital admission with age. From causing one in six deaths at age 25-44 years, circulatory disorders caused 39 per cent of deaths at age 45-64 years and 56 per cent of deaths among those over 64 years. However, as found in cancer, circulatory disorders accounted for far smaller percentages of hospital separations: 13 per cent of those aged 45-64 years and 20 per cent of those older than 64 years. These were still leading causes, but many other conditions which did not cause death caused hospitalisation. Prominent among the latter was gastro-intestinal disorders, which accounted for significant hospital admissions in all age groups.

The rate of hospitalisation increased with age, and the male rate was higher than the female in infants and children, and in the elderly (over 64 years). Between 15 and 44 years the female rate was higher but most of this excess was pregnancy-related or due to genito-urinary disorders. Again, the older the patient, the longer the average hospital stay.

The Australian Health Survey showed that 57 per cent of males and 67 per cent of females reported having experienced some form of illness in the fortnight preceding the survey, and reported having had one doctor consultation for every 3.6 of these illness experiences. Headache, insomnia, asthma, influenza, arthritis, hypertension and back trouble were the main conditions reported. While not usually life-threatening, such conditions, especially if chronic, may interfere with the quality of life.

Increased efforts are under way to improve our measurement of health so we can better assess the efficacy of health interventions in NSW.

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