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UWA study reveals Perth hospital emergency departments see one pre-schooler a day made sick by cigarette smokers

# Passive smoke hits under-fives

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EXCLUSIVE

Alarming new research shows that at least one child under the age of five is treated every day at Perth's hospital emergency departments as a direct result of breathing in cigarette smoke from people around them.

A University of WA analysis of tobacco-related emergency department attendances, believed to be the first in Australia, shows that last year, 384 children aged up to four were treated for acute respiratory conditions caused by passive smoking, with more than half deemed urgent cases.

Respected epidemiologist D'Arcy Holman and research assistant Victoria Gray found that across all age groups, 4881 West Australians — or one in 50 of all urgent cases at emergency departments — had a smoking-caused medical condition.

The most common complaints were chronic obstructive pulmonary disorder, or emphysema, heart rhythm problems, lower respiratory tract infections, stroke and heart failure.

The researchers said the figures were likely to be an underestimate because in some cases not enough information was recorded in hospital data for them to be able to conclude

that tobacco caused a patient's illness.

Professor Holman said smoking-related illnesses were clearly putting pressure on Perth's already strained emergency departments but he was surprised that smoking accounted for almost 5000 attendances a year.

Most concerning was the number of pre-schoolers sick from cigarette smoke, with respiratory infections and asthma the two biggest contributors to their illness.

"This is a group in the population who are completely involuntarily exposed to passive smoke, often from their parents, so it's pretty concerning," Professor Holman said.

Public Health Advocacy Institute

director Mike Daube said the findings should convince all parents not to smoke around their children.

"This is even more pressing confirmation of the need to protect children from passive smoking and these entirely preventable admissions to EDs, especially when our hospitals are already stretched so much," he said.

"This should send alarm bells ringing for parents and the health system."

Australian Medical Association WA president Gary Geelhoed, who works at Princess Margaret Hospital's emergency department, said the study showed the extent of serious illness

caused by passive smoking. "Last year, we studied a group of asthmatics and looked for evidence of exposure to second-hand smoke by measuring carbon monoxide levels in the children's blood, which we can do these days non-invasively by shining a light through their finger," he said.

"We haven't analysed the data yet but it did confirm that children are turning up to PMH's ED with evidence of being exposed to second-hand smoke.

"This study underlines the dangers of smoking around children in the home and in places even more confining like cars, which is the subject of legislation before State Parliament."