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Media release

Māori children more likely to be hospitalised, die from asthma

A new programme that gets underway in Taranaki this week has a potentially deadly illness in its sights – childhood asthma.

Asthma is a common condition in New Zealand children aged 2-14 . Most people live relatively well with asthma and its symptoms. But each year 4 out of every 1000 children under the age of 19 are hospitalised for asthma. For Māori, this statistic is higher (6 out of every 1000) compared to NZ European (2 out of every 1000).

Worse, Māori children are four times more likely to die from asthma than NZ European children¹.

Developed by PHARMAC, the Space to Breathe – He Tapu Te Hā programme aims to promote better awareness of asthma and how to manage it. By better understanding asthma and how to manage it, families can avoid the need for hospitals, and even death that can result from asthma.

PHARMAC's Marama Parore says headlines in the national papers last week are a reminder that asthma can be a killer for children, and can be avoided. She adds that Māori and Pacific people are being prescribed and using their reliever medicine to treat asthma and not enough of their preventer medicine. Rather than using long-acting preventers, people are relying on short-acting relievers (like salbutamol) after symptoms appear.

“What this programme is all about is improved knowledge of asthma and asthma treatment, right from doctors and pharmacists through to caregivers, parents and children,” says Marama Parore.

“Too often people are waiting for children to show asthma symptoms before seeking treatment, and then they end up in hospital. We know that Māori and Pacific children are two to three times more likely to be admitted to hospital than NZ European children.”

“And though the numbers are small, Māori children are up to four times more likely to die from asthma than NZ European children. One death is one too many, which is why we have worked to develop the Space to Breathe - He Tapu Te Hā programme, to increase education about asthma prevention to the groups who need it most.”

¹ Robson B, Harris H. (eds) *Hauora: Maori Standards of Health IV. A study of the years 2000-2005*. Wellington: Te Ropu Rangahau Hauora a Eru Pomare.

Space to Breathe – He Tapu Te Hā has been developed by PHARMAC in conjunction with regional health providers (Tui Ora, Tihi and Piki Te Ora) in New Plymouth, and the Best Practice Advocacy Centre BPACNZ. The Paediatric Society, and the Asthma and Respiratory Foundation have also been strongly involved in the development of the programme. Its aims are to

- increase awareness and knowledge of asthma;
- increase knowledge and understanding about asthma medicines;
- increase confidence of children with asthma and their families in managing asthma; and
- provide support and resources for carers to support wellness through management of asthma.

Marama Parore says the programme is innovative because it targets pre-school children and their families through kohanga reo and early childhood education centres.

“Asthma can affect children from a very young age so it is important that we provide people with the knowledge and tools to manage asthma as early as possible,” she says.

For parents and caregivers, the programme will provide education, support and personalised asthma management plans. It is being supported by resources such as story books, posters and reference manuals. Doctors will have access to a new decision support tool developed by BPACNZ.

The programme will be delivered to 20 kōhanga reo and early childhood education centres in Taranaki between April and September 2009, and will be evaluated to gauge its effectiveness.

Marama Parore says that, should the programme prove successful, PHARMAC will investigate a nationwide roll out.

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