

Leading from the wrong end with asthma

Maoris and Polynesians have more problems with asthma than Pakeha. Their mortality rate is higher too, 5.5% higher for Maori and 2.8% higher for Polynesians. These deaths account for 47% of the asthma deaths amongst 5 to 35 year olds. The Asthma Foundation is concerned to find out why this is so and what can be done to help.

A high percentage of Tokelauan immigrants to this country become asthmatics. Many have never had it before or suffered only mildly. They develop it more severely in New Zealand, which suggests that there may be something in the climate or environment here that can aggravate or bring on asthma. Research is currently being undertaken with funding from the Foundation to try and establish whether or not this is the case.

Asthma potentially affects 600,000 New Zealanders. Three hundred thousand are current sufferers and another 300,000 have either had it when they were younger or will get it later.

Recent years have seen an increase in the incidence of asthma as well as a climb in the mortality rate. In the 5 to 35 age group in New Zealand, rates are four times as high as those in the United States, the UK or Australia.

What is asthma? In short, it is difficulty in breathing. It ranges from slight breathlessness and wheezing to severe attacks where a person literally gasps for breath. It is a physiological



disease and not "something in the mind". It is caused by swelling of the bronchial passages. They swell in reaction to a variety of things — flu and colds, allergic reactions to foods, pollens or dust, cigarette smoke, sudden changes in temperature, or after physical exercise. Certain types of occupational fumes can be triggers, too.

Teenagers are particularly difficult to treat as they tend to be self conscious and embarrassed about their asthma and use of medications such as an inhaler. Parental monitoring is resented. Encouragement should be given to help teenagers take responsibility for their condition. Medications usually needn't be taken or used in public, and if the need does arise it can be done discreetly and with little fuss.

Another problem is that asthma fre-

quently recedes in the teenage years and teenagers are led into thinking they are "growing out of it" and are no longer asthmatic. Many do, but for some their medication is abandoned and sooner or later an unexpected or severe attack may come along.

There is little conclusive evidence as to why or when asthma strikes. Some people develop it in later life, any time from 30 on. Certainly, all asthmatics have very sensitive bronchial passages which can be irritated by many different factors. Smoking, pollution, car fumes, allergies such as house dust or animal dander can all affect the asthmatic.

But with proper diagnosis and monitored, consistent medical treatment, even the severest asthmatics can live normal or nearly normal lives. The old fashioned idea of an asthmatic being someone who is weak, frail, and not up to much, no longer applies. Considering that one in ten adults suffer as well as one in five children, that's an important point to remember.

For help and information, people at the Asthma Foundation of New Zealand and the local Asthma Societies are readily available. They provide support and advice on all aspects of asthma to supplement the help you receive from your doctor. The Foundation currently distributes 15 pamphlets aimed at helping asthmatics and their families cope with and understand asthma.

Asthma — from the

You see I got this asthma. That's what Maoris get. Maoris get that because they were made with skinny breathing tubes but Pakehas didn't. Some pakehas get skinny tubes but most of them have big ones.

When you have skinny tubes the air going in bumps into the air going out so you can't breath. When I could not breath I went to hospital. I had air in a tube with a mask. I was very scared I was by myself and when I looked when I woke up there was all these curtains and I thought "Is this dead".

I got lots of medicine and stuff. I

don't want my mates to see it. Sometimes I take it at home but most I don't in case my mates see.

Last year I couldn't play league because I got the asthma. Doctor said to use the stuff, but you can't use it in the middle of a game — Geeze —

My dad laughs he said "Go on son, take a big puff you might turn into a Pakeha if you get big fat tubes — Ha Ha — Well I know I won't do that I

think, but I don't know what will happen if I do it wrong.

Dear Doctors,

My name is Ruby I am 12 years old and I am a Maori and I am a freak. I have got asthma.

I know you get mad at me when I go back to hospital when I don't do what you tell me. I really get scared sometimes because my oldest cousin died from asthma and so did my little