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Better management of asthma possible

Better management of asthma in the community is not only possible, but has the potential to reduce the impact of the disease on people's lives, according to a report by the Australian Centre for Asthma Monitoring (ACAM)—a collaborating unit of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

The report, *Asthma in Australia 2005*, was launched in Sydney today by the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Health and Ageing, Christopher Pyne.

It shows that 1 in 7 children and 1 in 9 adults have current doctor-diagnosed asthma—these are high levels by international standards.

But, according to ACAM Director, Dr Guy Marks, there is much that can be done to improve outcomes of asthma and reduce attacks.

'Written asthma action plans have been shown to be very effective in managing this disease, yet their use has been falling since 1995. Only around 1 in 6 people with current asthma have them.'

'The plans are written instructions on how to recognise when asthma is getting worse, and what action to take when it does. There is no doubt that these plans help many people to control their asthma and stay out of hospital.'

'Similarly, regular use of inhaled corticosteroids can reduce asthma symptoms and prevent severe episodes in people with persistent asthma, but our statistics show that many people who would benefit from using them regularly are not doing so. On the other hand, among people using inhaled corticosteroids, the majority are taking them at the highest dose. For some of these people a lower dose may be just as effective.'

Dr Marks said there was nevertheless plenty of good news to tell about asthma.

'Deaths due to asthma are pretty uncommon now, with the rates falling by half since the early 1990s. In 2003, 314 people died in Australia due to asthma, with nearly two-thirds of these deaths being in people aged 65 years or over.'

'And since the early 1990s there has also been a fall in rates of GP visits and hospitalisations for asthma in all age groups, especially children.'

Other findings in the report include:

- Children attend emergency departments for asthma most frequently after the beginning of each school term, possibly because of increased spread of respiratory infections at this time.
- Asthma is more common among Indigenous Australians, particularly adults, than other Australians.
- In primary school-aged children, asthma is more common among boys. After the teenage years, more women have asthma than men.

Canberra , 10 August 2005

For media copies of the report: Publications Officer, AIHW, tel. 02 6244 1032