

# Smoking's hidden costs

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Peter Meecham

Henk Bosma takes a break as others carry on around him in the exercise class run by the Canterbury Respiratory Relief Society in Christchurch. The members take part in the class once a week in their fight against diseases like Emphysema or COPD.

Public health expert Nick Wilson said New Zealand's goal of being smokefree by 2025 was unlikely without more progress from politicians. Wilson said research that showed just how much smoking was hurting the economy might jump start political action.

"If they see how beneficial for the economy it is having a healthier workforce - If it's presented to politicians - then maybe they'll be more likely to do some of the more bolder measures that are required to get to the smokefree 2025 goal because at the moment it's unlikely we're going to achieve that goal of under 5 per cent of smoking prevalence by 2025."

Wilson and other researchers at the University of Otago modelled health benefits from raising tobacco tax and found out the savings the government would get by raising the tobacco tax or cutting down on the outlets selling tobacco.

This research was provided to the government during their deliberations on raising the tax.

Currently 605,000 New Zealand adults are smokers. That number would have to shrink to less than 224,000 in order to meet the smokefree 2025 goal with the current population.

Wilson said the productivity cost of tobacco-related illness, among other illnesses was an area research was leading into.

"That works in many ways, if a smoker dies of a heart-attack at age 50 then obviously they're not going to be productive citizens, but if they get a tobacco-related disease like a heart-attack or a stroke, they may retire early because of those diseases or they may just work at a less productive level," said Wilson.

Research published by the Treasury in December 2015 found there was a significant increase in government income support, drops in employment rate and lower income for those in the four years after a diagnosis of stroke, traumatic brain injury, coronary heart disease, diabetes, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and breast cancer, but not for melanoma and prostate cancer.

Wilson said within the Treasury's study tobacco would have played an important role in a number of those heart attacks.

"Of all the investments in the health sector, one of the best is actually improving tobacco control and reducing smoking," said Wilson.

Treasury noted that stroke, coronary heart disease, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease can be prevented through tobacco control interventions.

A study published this week in *Tobacco Control* found tobacco-related costs on a global scale accounted for 2 per cent of total GDP, or \$1967 billion in one year.

The study found nearly 40 per cent of this total was borne by developing countries.

A 'cost of illness' approach was used to account for both direct costs like hospital admissions and treatment, and indirect costs, like value of productivity lost to death and disability in current and future years, for a given year.

The number of working years lost because of smoking related illness added up to 26.8 million globally, 18 million of these years were due to death.

The health spend attributed to smoking totalled \$578 b.

The researchers pointed out that their calculations did not include the health and economic harms caused by second hand smoke or smokeless forms of tobacco.

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