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Homeless youth at most risk of developing chronic diseases

Ten-year Notre Dame study reveals big jump in street population

Results of a study released in April 2018 by The University of Notre Dame Australia show an alarming increase in chronic disease among young homeless people.

Over the past decade, the percentage of young homeless people with two or more chronic diseases has risen by more than 16 percent, according to the study led by researchers from Notre Dame and the University of Western Australia.

The most common chronic mental, physical and cardiovascular diseases range from anxiety and depression resulting from substance abuse; chronic back pain; diabetes and obesity; skin disorders; asthma and dizziness; and ear, nose and throat conditions.

The 10-year study reviewed medical records of 4285 patients to identify the number, patterns and severity of health conditions of the patients who were treated by Freo Street Doctor, a free health service run by Black Swan Health.

Results of the study, which were published in the *Australian Journal of General Practice*, showed the rates of chronic disease in homeless people has increased from 46.4 percent (2006-11) to 63 percent (2012-15).

“There are many risk factors that lead to multiple chronic diseases in homeless people. The stigma associated with being labelled as ‘homeless’ is one of the most common – as these people feel disconnected from society, avoid regular contact with doctors and can be hospitalised due to their condition,” said lead researcher Associate Professor Diane Arnold-Reed from Notre Dame’s School of Medicine.

Findings also showed that rates of chronic disease in people aged under 25 years were higher in Aboriginal patients (36.9 percent) than non-Aboriginal patients (16.1 percent). The study recorded a high Aboriginal attendance (31.5 percent of the total cohort) at the Freo Street Doctor, which is in sharp contrast with less than 2 percent of Aboriginal patients attending mainstream GP clinics Australia-wide.

“Being Aboriginal is the strongest predictor of chronic diseases as these patients are twice as likely to suffer from multiple conditions compared to non-Aboriginal patients,” Associate Professor Arnold-Reed said.

Study Co-author and GP, Professor Tom Brett, said: “Primary care management of young Aboriginal patients is critical in preventing exacerbations of chronic diseases.”

The research team comprises: Professor Tom Brett and Associate Professor Diane Arnold-Reed, Wendy Chan She Ping-Delfos (Notre Dame); and Dr, Professor Colleen Fisher, Professor David Preen, Professor Elizabeth Geelhoed and Dr Cecily Strange (UWA).

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