



MEDIA RELEASE

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Successful community action – but smokefree car law still needed to protect children

Newly-published research shows the potential for community campaigns to reduce smoking in cars, but legislation is still critical to ensure children are protected the authors say.

The University of Otago Wellington study found that a local campaign may have halved smoking in vehicles with children in the Wellington suburb of Wainuiomata. However the lower smoking level achieved was still five times higher than that in another Wellington suburb – Karori.

The researchers observed more than 57,000 vehicles in Wainuiomata after a local campaign in 2013 to decrease the exposure of children to smoking in cars. The campaign included local sports role models, a webpage, radio advertising, signage at school drop-off zones, branding at community and school events, smokefree car information packs and a smokefree car story competition.

They found that the smoking seen in vehicles by roadside observers decreased from 6% in 2005 to 5% in 2011, and then to 3% in 2013. Smoking in vehicles with other people present declined three times faster during 2011-13 than during 2005-2011.

Lead author Associate Professor George Thomson says the successful results reflect the great effort many people put into the campaign, and show what community efforts can do.

But it also shows that government must step in to protect children, Thomson says.

“If governments can successfully do this in Australian states, Canadian provinces and American states, then they can here. Why do we have laws to protect children in cars with seat belts and car seats – but not protect them from hazardous airborne poisons in a confined space?”

Another of the researchers, Associate Professor Nick Wilson, says smoking in vehicles can seriously harm the health of children, due to the confined space and the particular vulnerability of children when their lungs are still developing.

“Health problems caused by secondhand smoke, such as chest infections, can send children to hospital. Other problems can be life-long – such as asthma. Smoking in

vehicles also increases the risk of children subsequently taking up smoking,” Wilson says.

While the New Zealand Government has a world-leading goal of becoming a smokefree nation by 2025, it is not doing nearly enough to realise this goal, Wilson says.

“Increasing the tobacco tax annually is very important – but making such places as cars smokefree for children is an obvious gap. A smokefree car law would signal to everyone how hazardous tobacco smoke is.”

The study has been published in the peer-review journal, the *New Zealand Medical Journal*, and was partly funded by Regional Public Health, Lower Hutt.

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For a list of Otago experts available for media comment, please go to:
www.otago.ac.nz/mediaexpertise

A copy of the article can be obtained by emailing the authors.

For a recent Canadian study on the evidence that laws for smokefree cars actually work, see: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23202259>