

Asthma Council welcomes drop in asthma deaths but warns against complacency

New data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) reveals a significant decrease in asthma-related deaths in Australian women, however concern continues as the number of deaths remains high and the death toll for men stagnates.

Figures show there were 389 asthma-related deaths recorded in Australia in 2018, comprising 250 females and 139 males, which signifies a decrease from 441 in 2017, and 457 in 2016. Those aged 75 and over continue to account for nearly two-thirds of deaths (241 of 389), while deaths in children remain uncommon but can still occur – 7 children lost their lives to asthma in 2018.

National Asthma Council Australia (NAC) Chief Executive, Siobhan Brophy says while adult women are consistently at the highest risk of dying from asthma, the significant drop in deaths from 281 to 234 could be attributed to several mitigating factors.

‘We believe that increased patient awareness following the epidemic thunderstorm asthma event in Melbourne in 2016 has played a large role in this reduction,’ says Ms Brophy. ‘The development of new ways to manage severe asthma is also having an impact – biological agents are improving patient lives, while increased management and review protocols surrounding their potential prescription are providing greater opportunities to optimise patient care.’

NAC spokesperson and general practitioner Dr Ian Almond says that while severe asthma affects only about 3 to 10 per cent of the 2.5 million Australians with asthma, it can be life-threatening and deeply distressing for patients and their families. ¹

‘Severe asthma, which is defined as asthma that remains uncontrolled despite the highest recommended level of inhaled medication or maintenance oral corticosteroids, or that requires such treatment to prevent it becoming uncontrolled, has significant impacts on patients’ health, careers, families and daily lives.

‘While it’s important to ensure that those who could benefit from new treatments are identified correctly and referred promptly, it’s equally important to identify people whose uncontrolled asthma is potentially due to other causes, such as comorbidities or poor adherence, so that these issues can be addressed,’ says Dr Almond.

By following a series of clear steps outlined in NAC’s new [Severe Asthma Checklist](#), GPs can systematically consider common issues in severe asthma, including adherence, inhaler technique, comorbidities, triggers and the potential

¹ Hekking, PP., Wener, RR., Amelink, M., Zwinderman, AH., Bouvy, ML. and Bel, EH. (2015). The prevalence of severe refractory asthma. *The Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology*, 135(4), pp.896-902.

for reliever overuse, to help ensure all patients with asthma receive the treatment and support they need to better manage their condition.

Drawing on guidance from two recent NAC publications – the [Australian Asthma Handbook](#) and [Monoclonal antibody therapy for severe asthma](#) information paper – the Checklist was developed in consultation with an expert panel that included Dr Almond, who also sits on the *Australian Asthma Handbook* Guidelines Committee.

In 2018 chronic lower respiratory diseases (4.9%) continues to remain the fifth leading cause of deaths in Australia (ABS). A significant proportion of asthma morbidity and its associated costs in Australia are preventable.²

PDF and hard copies of the Checklist are available through [NAC's website](#) and can also be obtained from AstraZeneca representatives.

Development of the resource was supported by an unrestricted educational grant from AstraZeneca. The NAC maintained strict editorial independence.

For more information on severe asthma diagnosis and management, visit www.astmahandbook.org.au. For how-to videos and checklists on inhaler technique, written asthma action plan templates and information papers, visit www.nationalasthma.org.au.

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Full report of asthma-related deaths by age, sex and state, visit National Asthma Council's [website](#).

For evidence-based guidance and best practice on asthma, refer to National Asthma Council's [Australian Asthma Handbook](#).

For further information, or to arrange an interview with a National Asthma Council Australia spokesperson, please contact:

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² Reddel, H., Sawyer, S., Everett, P., Flood, P. and Peters, M. (2015). Asthma control in Australia: a cross-sectional web-based survey in a nationally representative population. *The Medical Journal of Australia*, 202(9), pp.492-496.