Using multimedia to reduce tobacco use among Indigenous young people

Menzies School of Health Research

More than half of Indigenous Australians smoke, which is more than double the rate of non-Indigenous Australians. Tobacco smoking is responsible for one in five of all Indigenous deaths and is one of the main causes of chronic disease among Indigenous Australians.

Yet, although tackling smoking is an essential step to close the gap in health outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous life expectancies, important research findings do not reach these populations. There is also a scarcity of culturally appropriate and accessible health promotional material for Indigenous people that focuses on smoking. The result is that health and education professionals and communities lack the support and knowledge that is needed to develop, deliver and support appropriate interventions. In particular, there is a need for resources that utilise easily accessible modes of communication targeting young Indigenous people.

Tobacco-related resources must be culturally appropriate and engaging to young Indigenous people if they are to be effective. Research has shown that youth who want to stop smoking rarely access traditional cessation services. Their preferred modes of communication include multimedia, social networking sites, animation, music and particularly mobile phones. Multimedia modes of communication have also proven very effective in the education of those who have issues with literacy and/or English as a second language.

A reported 60 per cent rate of tobacco cessation in New Zealand was directly related to a multimedia strategy that engaged with youth (including Maori) by delivering video messages via mobile phones. With no projects in Australia using multimedia cross platform delivery for tobacco control, particularly for this target group, the Government’s Department of Health and Ageing funded Menzies to produce strategies and resources aimed at changing knowledge and attitudes to smoking among Indigenous youth through their understanding of the effects of tobacco addiction on individual and community health.

The No Smokes project

The resulting No Smokes project is a targeted communication project set in a research and evaluation framework. What this means is that focus groups with product end users, including young Indigenous people and intermediaries such as teachers and health workers, are run in the formative stages of the project to identify knowledge and attitudes towards tobacco use, current use patterns and access to social media and mobile technology.

Initial consultation groups were set up in urban Melbourne and the Northern Territory, and participants were recruited with the assistance of an intermediary organisation from each location. Focus groups were run with 12–18 year olds: 37 per cent of participants came from an urban setting (Melbourne, Victoria), 30 per cent from a regional setting (Darwin, Northern Territory) and 33 per cent from a remote setting (Yirrkala, East Arnhem land, Northern Territory) to reflect the project’s intent to appeal to a national audience. Overall 56 per cent of participants were male and 44 per cent were female. Participants included smokers (38 per cent) and non-smokers (44 per cent), while 18 per cent did not declare their smoking status. The average age participants gave for starting smoking was 14.9 years. Focus groups were also run with secondary target audiences that included teachers, Indigenous health workers and hostel staff from remote, regional and urban settings.

Indigenous youth showed a substantial interest and proficiency in using multimedia devices. Even in remote communities, access and usage of DVD players, iPods and mobile phones was very common. Computers and Internet access were also available but usually in a school or workplace rather than the home. Access to these media was increased in regional, urban and metropolitan regions, and uptake tended to be greater among adolescents who are more likely to be exposed to multimedia via schools and peers.

Viral marketing strategies employed by the project will include mobile phones, email networks and popular social networking sites. The No Smokes website, to be launched on World No Tobacco Day (31 May 2012), will house several videos and animations including an animated brain describing how tobacco addiction works and explaining the role of Dopamine. A separate animation shows facts around tobacco use for Indigenous Australians and links these with specific health outcomes. There are also video messages from Indigenous role models giving their tobacco story, a digital storytelling portal, podcasting and blogging tools. These resources will contribute to a sustainable resource bank that will continue to be distributed well beyond the life of the project.

Information on the health effects, impacts of quitting, ways to quit and tools to quit will be available on the website. An educational flipchart can be used electronically or ordered in hard copy for more remote sites with no computer access. All videos and the website can be viewed on mobile devices and there are links with Facebook and other social media.

Evaluation of the impact of all products and the website will be available later this year.
Communicating research findings to affected communities in culturally relevant ways

The production of locally made multimedia resources is consistent with Menzies’ aim to provide culturally relevant educational resources. These resources can assist communities and health professionals to achieve a greater understanding of the impact of tobacco use on communities. They provide evidence-based biomedical information about tobacco and the brain in a manner that is culturally appropriate for the target audience. Importantly, the information is not simplified but rather recognises the capacity of the target audience to uptake informative biomedical information if it is presented in an accessible style and format.

Over the past decade, Menzies has developed culturally appropriate assessments to measure the impact of specific substances including alcohol, inhalants, cannabis and kava. This research has highlighted the lack of appropriate strategies to communicate the outcomes of research. Such information would undoubtedly improve the outcome for substance abusers and thus communication of research findings is considered an essential part of any intervention for addiction.

To communicate the outcomes of our research, we have developed a suite of educational flipcharts and animation videos (i.e., “Brain Stories”). Importantly, these have been developed through extensive consultation with and the involvement of Indigenous people. The most important part of this process has been to develop, through lengthy consultation, a shared understanding of the concepts for communication. These resources have been effective in communicating complex neuroscientific information across cultures.

Their efficacy is due to the involvement of Indigenous people, who have defined the images to be used (created by an Indigenous artist) and the selection of appropriate language. Visual imagery is really important. Focus testing identified, for example, that people were frustrated with getting simplified messages when communicating across language and cultures. Instead they preferred to be acknowledged for their intelligence and capacity to understand information if it is appropriately delivered.

Possible lessons for reaching youth (particularly Indigenous youth) in other Commonwealth countries

1. Develop resources that are broadly applicable, representative to subgroups within the target audience and sustainable.

This project was developed with input from three regions representing the geographical spread of Indigenous groups throughout Australia: urban, regional and remote. Appropriate resources were initially produced as generic educational materials in English to be accessible to national audiences. This enabled the provision of appropriate evidence-based material that is otherwise only available in technical or academic reports. A knowledge base identified in the generation of the initial resources is now able to be utilised from which more localised versions of the information can be produced. Resources can be created to be sustainable using techniques such as animation as well as interactive resources that can promote the longevity of the materials.

2. Local content that includes familiar faces is a powerful motivator for viewers and should be maximised wherever possible.

The website is designed so that users can quickly identify and access content that is local, contains people they know or is in their first language. Locally produced content with familiar faces is a powerful hook. Across all sites, young people were interested in seeing multimedia content that included people they knew (e.g., family, friends and community leaders). This was particularly important for regional and remote young people.

3. Online resources can help address communication barriers such as reduced literacy, linguistic diversity and dispersed populations. However, diversity in Internet access and proficiency must be catered for.

Young Indigenous people are extremely diverse with some of the major differences being English literacy skills, cultural diversity, Internet access, techno proficiency and engagement with social networking sites. The multimedia platform will need to cater for a wide range of English literacy levels and online skills. As many of the target audience may have English as a second language and/or issues with English literacy, the visual impact of multimedia presentations such as videos and animations are often the most popular and effective modes of communication. Resources developed for the No Smokes project are accessible through cross platform distribution via the Internet, mobile phones and other devices to cater for the differing multimedia resources available to the target audience.

4. It is critical to involve the target population in resource development to ensure resources are engaging, relevant and effectively communicate key messages.

Young Indigenous people want to know immediately that an anti-tobacco website is for them. Colours, images and role models help to quickly communicate the notion that this is an Indigenous space. The use of visual content of Indigenous people promoted such recognition. Indigenous colours were also used to establish immediate recognition and rapport with the target audience; however, participants indicated other colours could be used. They also indicated that clichéd icons should be avoided. Components of the website that appealed to participants were the smoking calculator, video, free stuff and game. The website will house free downloadable music that is refreshed regularly.

5. The messages developed should be based on pre-existing knowledge and beliefs.

By involving the target population prior to the development of resources, an understanding of attitudes and knowledge about tobacco use were developed. Information obtained during this process was then built on and utilised within the project. Positive beliefs about smoking were identified and could be challenged by the project. Some of these included that smoking was normal, grown up and cool. Pre-existing knowledge held by Indigenous young people about the negative consequences of tobacco use was identified and expanded upon. Resources were developed to help overcome identified barriers to quitting such as cravings and...
withdrawal, temptation, peer pressure, stress, alcohol consumption and having to avoid smokers.

6. Creating a suite of resources helps ensure that anti-tobacco messages are packaged in a way that is both informative and entertaining, maximising reach.

Entertaining resources can provide valuable ‘hooks’ that act as an entree to other anti-tobacco resources. Images of Indigenous celebrities (and non celebrities) are profiled on the homepage. These come from a range of communities as local celebrities have greatest appeal for young people living in remote communities. Some content also included high profile non-Indigenous celebrities because participants indicated interest in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous celebrities.

7. Facebook provides a good mechanism for linking urban-based Indigenous young people to websites but is less likely to work in remote locations.

Facebook will be utilised as a tool for driving urban-based users to the website and encouraging peer-to-peer promotion. However, there was an acute difference between urban-based and other participants. None of the remote participants had email addresses, which would be a precursor for accessing social networking sites.

8. Internet filters could affect the accessibility of project resources.

For young people living in remote areas, the Internet is typically accessed or facilitated through the school, which means that some websites such as Facebook and YouTube are blocked due to departmental policy. Strategies to address the potential of filters to limit access to No Smokes resources need to be considered.

Conclusion

The use of purpose-made, multimedia, anti-tobacco resources is expected to promote changes in the attitudes and knowledge of Indigenous young people with respect to tobacco use and its related harms and lead to subsequent changes in behaviour. In addition, these resources will significantly improve the ability of health and education professionals to deliver appropriate care and education related to tobacco use. They are designed to fit well within school or health-care programmes to ensure long-term sustainability, and it is expected that health and educational professionals will use and disseminate them. Indigenous adults and non-Indigenous people also have the potential to learn from this innovative multimedia approach to delivering biomedical and evidence-based knowledge. As the project is web based, an unlimited number of people will benefit indirectly as a result of the project and its accessibility.

Endnotes

1 www.nosmokes.com.au
2 See www.menzies.edu.au/brainstories

The Menzies School of Health Research is Australia’s leader in Indigenous and tropical health research. It has conducted research for 27 years and research into substance abuse and Indigenous people for more than 17 years.