

Childhood Asthma Prevalence Rates Finally Stop Increasing

For the first time since the 1980s the number of children diagnosed with asthma has stopped increasing.

Dr Guy Marks, Head of Epidemiology, Woolcock Institute of Medical Research said, "Throughout the 80s we saw very large increases in the number of children with asthma and allergy symptoms. However, in the 90s the prevalence has stopped increasing and, for some measures of asthma, it has actually decreased."

Between 1982 and 1992 there was a 25 per cent increase in the number of children diagnosed with asthma, but between 1992 and 2002 there was a seven per cent decrease.

These findings were supported by a five per cent decrease in the number of people who said they had taken asthma medication between 1992 and 2002. Whereas there had been a 19 per cent increase between 1982 and 1992.

For the past twenty years researchers from the Woolcock Institute of Medical Research have been repeating a cross-sectional study, known as the Belmont Asthma and Allergy Study, with children aged between eight and eleven years to compare the prevalence of asthma and allergic diseases. On each occasion in 1982, 1992 and 2002 over 700 children from primary schools in Belmont, NSW were tested.

Interestingly, there was no significant change in the number of people who were allergic or the number who had airway hyperresponsiveness (an abnormality of lung function that is closely related to asthma) over the past 10 years.

Dr Marks said, "The Belmont Asthma and Allergy study is considered to be one of the most important studies of asthma prevalence in the world because it includes both questionnaires and clinical tests to monitor for symptoms, providing both subjective and objective measures. By using standard methods to measure asthma and allergy we are able to reliably track trends in the amount of disease there is in the community."

The findings will be presented at the Thoracic Society of Australia and New Zealand Conference in Adelaide.

The study was part funded by the Australian Health Management Group and Allen and Hanburys.