Media release

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ALL GOVERNMENTS SHOULD FOLLOW VIC PRISON SMOKE BAN: VICHEALTH

Victoria's peak health promotion agency has today applauded the Victorian Government's plans to phase out smoking among staff and inmates in Victoria's correctional facilities by 2015.

VicHealth CEO Jerril Rechter said this bold initiative would improve the health of people who are much more likely to be addicted to cigarettes than the general Victorian population.

In 2012, 84 per cent of prison entrants were current smokers, which is around five times the proportion of the general community.

"This initiative will help people who are in the grip of a nicotine addiction, to improve their health and also protect staff and non-smoking prisoners from second-hand smoke," Ms Rechter said.

"Quitting in prison can be difficult, because of the stressful environment and the fact that smoking is so prevalent, so this move will support people who are perhaps more vulnerable to tobacco to quit."

Evidence shows almost half (46%) of prisoners in Victoria want to quit but currently the success rate for quitting smoking is very low with only 8 per cent success.

Ms Rechter added preliminary data on smokefree prisons showed promise.

New Zealand was the first country to ban smoking in prisons on 1 July 2011.

"The results from the New Zealand ban are already showing promise. One study shows that air pollution in their prison facilities has halved and researchers say that a significant health hazard has been reduced for both staff and prisoners," Ms Rechter said.

Ms Rechter added that in New Zealand, around 67 per cent of the prison population were smokers, until the introduction of the ban, when the figure reduced to zero.

"After the smokefree policy was announced and prior to its implementation, around 2000 New Zealand prisoners started nicotine replacement therapy and the path to a healthier life. There's no doubt this pattern will be repeated here in Victoria.

"The New Zealand example shows that this is an effective public health measure and should be implemented across Australia and internationally."

Since the Tobacco Act was introduced to Victoria in 1987, smoking rates have dropped from 34 per cent to 13.3 per cent, however, every year, smoking causes 4000 preventable deaths in Victoria.

VicHealth supports smokefree initiatives as part of a raft of measures to reduce tobacco uptake and consumption across the board, including price, branding and visibility of cigarettes.

The Northern Territory introduced a ban in July this year, and the Queensland Government will also ban smoking in prisons from 1 May 2014. The NSW and ACT governments are also considering similar moves.

ENDS

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