

Start the conversation – www.starttheconversation.org.au

Alfred Health submission for the 2015 Vic Health Awards

1 Executive summary

Alfred Health, one of Australia's leading health services is committed to maximising the health and wellbeing of the community it serves. While Alfred Health recognises the importance of treating illness, prevention is also a key driver for the organisation.

[Start the conversation](#) is an innovative digital communication campaign that challenges health professionals to raise the topic of smoking with their patients. It capitalises on the opportunities for health professionals to generate a population health impact in the area of smoking.

In a four minute [video](#), real patients and real clinicians share the life changing stories that resulted in quitting smoking. There were no scripts; it is highly authentic. The campaign reverses the traditional approach to smoking cessation. Rather than targeting the person who smokes, the call to action is for health professionals.

Aim

- To influence health professionals to raise the topic of smoking with their patients thereby contributing to reductions in smoking rates within Victoria

Objectives

- To create a digital communication campaign that emotionally compels health professionals to change their practice
- To promote the campaign with health professionals within Victoria and beyond
- To demonstrate leadership in the area of preventative health practice

[Start the conversation](#) launched in September 2014, was viewed more than 20,000 times within its first three months, and it now sustains up to 3,000 views per month. While the campaign was created for Victoria, it achieved significant international exposure on its first day of release.

Response to the campaign has been overwhelming. Our health professionals are emotionally compelled:

- *“The video is a reminder of back to basics, how preventative health care can be so effective. In the past we would let someone else have the conversation. Now our team of anaesthetists routinely have the conversations and offer support, all prompted by start the conversation. The strike rate of patients quitting smoking before surgery is increasing every day.”* Justin Burke, Anaesthetist, Alfred Health.

- *“When I first saw the film I was extremely emotional as it brought back memories of me trying to convince my Father to stop smoking when I was a child. The one in 33 message resonates and encourages me and my colleagues to start the conversation.”* Dr Louise Dillon, Geriatrician, Alfred Health

The campaign demonstrates high value for money with the total spend not exceeding \$35,000. As a result of [start the conversation](#), more conversations are taking place and more quit smoking attempts are occurring. Health professionals are showing great commitment to driving down smoking rates within Victoria.

2. Be a catalyst for change that brings potential to result in positive and sustainable improvement in the health of Victorians

Start the conversation

[Start the conversation](#) is an innovative digital communication campaign that challenges health professionals to raise the topic of smoking with their patients. It capitalises on the opportunities for health professionals to generate a population health impact in the area of smoking.

Developed by Alfred Health and funded by the Victorian Government, the campaign's power arises from its sector led approach.

In a four minute [video](#) central to the campaign, real patients and real clinicians share the life changing stories that resulted in quitting smoking. The campaign website (www.starttheconversation.org.au) also includes evidence to support the campaign, patient stories and expert opinion on how to have the conversations.

The campaign reverses the traditional approach to smoking cessation. Rather than targeting the person who smokes, the call to action is for health professionals. It is deliberately emotional. Health professionals already know the health consequences of smoking and this campaign compels them to raise the topic with their patients.

[Start the conversation](#) complements existing smoking cessation strategies, including those led by Quit Victoria. It actively supports the statewide *Supporting Patients to be Smokefree* project that aims to ensure all people who access the Victorian health system are asked about their smoking, provided with at least a brief intervention response, and have their smoking status and action taken included in discharge communication. This project is led by Alfred Health and funded by the Victorian Government.

Future needs of target groups and impact on the wider community

International evidence identifies advice from a health professional as the greatest external trigger in prompting a quit attempt (23%). This is more significant than advice from a family member or friend (14%), government advertising (4%) and health warnings (3%) (West 2006).

Of the 13% of the Victorian population who smokes, the majority would have contact with a health professional. As such, [start the conversation](#) relies on the influence of health professionals in prompting quit smoking attempts in order to achieve a sustainable reduction in population smoking rates.

Empowering target groups

While the campaign is not evidence heavy, it does rely on 'number needed to treat', a concept that resonates strongly with the target population of health professionals. *One in every 33 conversations leads to a patient successfully quitting smoking* is the central line within the campaign. When health professionals consider that each conversation may be as simple as one minute within their existing interaction with a patient, they realise that for every 33 minutes they invest, someone will quit smoking – a very high degree of return and one they strongly value.

In the case of aspirin to manage cardiovascular risk, the number needed to treat is 1667, around 50 times higher, yet it is still a widely accepted practice within healthcare (ATT, 2009).

While the majority of people who smoke (81%) intend to quit at some stage (Brennan, 2007), many experience low self-efficacy related to previous unsuccessful attempts; we know that the offer of support by a health professional is central to increasing the number of quit attempts as well as the effectiveness of those attempts.

Further, evidence highlights the potential harm when health professionals do not address smoking with their patients. By seeing a patient and not advising them to quit makes that patient even less likely to make a quit attempt (West, 2011).

Justin Burke, Anaesthetist, Alfred Health says: *“The video is a reminder of back to basics, how preventative health care can be so effective. I see 3,500 elective surgical patients a year. In the past we would let someone else have the conversation. Now our team of anaesthetists routinely have the conversations and offer support, all prompted by start the conversation. The strike rate of patients quitting smoking before surgery is increasing every day.”*

Project reach and future roll-out

The effectiveness of a sector led campaign is demonstrated via its reach and its cut through. [Start the conversation](#) performed highly in both areas. The campaign was viewed more than 20,000 times in the first three months after its release, with 12,000 of those views occurring within the first month. It now sustains up to 3,000 views per month on an ongoing basis (see Appendix 1).

Patient perspectives are central to the campaign

Patient Darryl Baker says: *“I had more than ten unsuccessful attempts to quit smoking before a life-changing conversation with a nurse. All health professionals from specialists to allied health can make a difference through the start the conversation approach.”*

Patient Christene Day says: *“I had been with a GP for 25 years and although the smoking conversation may have come up, a persistent message or the reasons why I should stop smoking were not delivered. I didn’t think this would happen to me.”*

Christene’s story is particularly interesting. She recalls her repeated visits to The Alfred for treatment for chronic obstructive pulmonary disease over a two-year period and the support she received to reduce and then cease her smoking. She notes *“Alfred Health was a big support and non-judgemental through the process”*.

It is stories such as Darryl and Christene’s that start the conversation shares in order to influence the practice of health professionals across Victoria.

3. Demonstrate a firm commitment to health promotion by using evidence-informed actions and initiatives.

The evidence

The main driver for the [start the conversation](#) campaign can be attributed to four key pieces of evidence:

1. Smoking is the single greatest cause of preventable illness and death in Australia (AIHW, 2008)
2. Health professionals' advice is the major external trigger for a quit attempt (West, 2006)
3. One in every 33 conversations will lead to a person successfully quitting (Stead, 2008)
4. Patients expect health professionals to ask them about smoking. If they do not, a patient will be less likely to attempt to quit. (West, 2011)

After the age of 35, three months of life is lost for each year of continued smoking. Evidence shows that people who smoke live ten years less on average than people who do not (Jha, 2013).

Despite such convincing evidence regarding smoking related harms and the value of quitting, conversations between health professionals and patients were not the norm. Practice was highly variable, inconsistent and non-systematic as evidenced by a statewide situational analysis conducted by Alfred Health as part of the *Supporting Patients to be Smokefree* project.

Barriers to having the conversations with patients about smoking were considered:

- a perception the conversations are ineffective
- lack of time
- lack of skills
- reluctance to raise the issue due to perceived sensitivity
- perceived lack of patient motivation

[Start the conversation](#) directly addresses a number of these barriers, highlighting that conversations may be as simple as one minute within an existing interaction, that conversations are expected and valued by patients, and not offering support can be harmful.

Stakeholder engagement

[Start the conversation](#) was launched at the Asia-Pacific Healthcare Conference in September 2014. The response to the campaign was overwhelming. It has and will feature in plenary and other sessions on many more occasions:

- International Network of Health Promoting Hospitals and Health Services Conference - Oslo, 2015
- Oceania Tobacco Control Conference – Perth, 2015
- Society of Hospital Pharmacists of Australia (SHPA) National Conference – Darwin, 2014
- Perioperative Medicine Special Interest Group and College of Intensive Care Medicine Meeting - Noosa, 2014
- Victorian Regional Committee's Annual Surgeons Meeting – Melbourne, 2014

- Australian Disease Management Association - Primary and Secondary Prevention of Chronic Disease Seminar - Melbourne, 2015

Adam Stormont, Monash Health Pharmacist recalls the screening of [start the conversation](#) at the opening plenary of the SHPA conference delivered by SHPA President Professor Michael Dooley. *“We were all awaiting Michael’s opening address but he didn’t speak, he just clicked play. As a health professional, you get busy, you can forget how your own practice can be life changing. Start the conversation really hit home. It made me want to make even more of a difference. Over 1,000 of us sat in absolute silence – it was powerful.”*

Associate Professor Andrew Way, Chief Executive, Alfred Health spread the word by talking to other health service CEOs. Andrew says: *“We have many calls to action for our health professionals. This one stood out. I was excited to see the opportunities for our health professionals to make such a significant contribution to population health within their clinical practice. I was proud to share the campaign with my peers.”*

Addressing health inequality and benefiting people from a disadvantaged backgrounds

[Start the conversation](#) features real patients, real health professionals and no scripts. These four patients represent the inequalities in smoking - chronic disease, mental illness, isolation, insecure housing and organ transplantation. People health professionals would not naturally expect to quit smoking.

The intent of the campaign is to ensure conversations happen systematically; every patient, every time. This approach aims to prevent judgment by the health professional and ensure equality of care for all people who smoke. The campaign’s implementation is often complemented by calls to maximise the effectiveness of smoking related care for those who need it most, such as within our mental health services where patient smoking rates are as high as 75%.

Patient John Powell openly shared his experience of being brought to The Alfred by ambulance during the middle of the night with severe shortness of breath. John maintained a very clear recollection of the time an Alfred Health medical practitioner spoke to him about his smoking. He had no previous intention to quit smoking, even during his ambulance transport. But that conversation changed him immediately. John felt it was the first time in his life that someone had shown faith in his ability to achieve something. John was smokefree for almost two years; he passed away recently.

John loved telling his story. We so gratefully acknowledge his contribution to improving care for people who smoke. We love that his success inspired many of his ‘mates’ to quit smoking too.

4. Exemplify innovation and leadership in taking action to improve and promote health and reduce chronic disease and/or addressing emerging health issues.

Innovation and leadership in taking action to improve and promote health

Alfred Health is proud of its long-standing reputation as a leading health service; a reputation founded on delivering the highest quality of treatment for people affected by illness, disease and injury. Now in 2015, Alfred Health enjoys a broad reputation; one which includes international recognition for its 'prevention system'.

[Start the conversation](#) is unique. It is the first campaign of its type that targets health professionals to contribute to a population health gain. Alfred Health has shown substantial leadership to influence its own practice as well as that of its peers. The overwhelming response to the campaign is testament to its effective design and distribution. There is great confidence that [start the conversation](#) is leading to more conversations and more quit smoking attempts.

Creative initiatives

Alfred Health worked in partnership with a creative agency to develop the [start the conversation](#) digital campaign. The objective was to share real life stories, and demonstrate the life-changing conversations people had with health professionals that led them to stop smoking.

The campaign profiled the health professional and patient perspectives, real people and no scripts. The result is an emotive, approachable and award-winning message that is positive for the future – [start the conversation](#) won gold in the Melbourne Design Awards 2014. The award recognised the campaign design as bold, brave and highly effective.

Communication collateral such as postcards, screensavers, web banners and physical pull up banners complemented the distribution of the digital campaign (see Appendix 2).

[Start the conversation](#) was designed for access on computer and portable devices and from all operating platforms. Health services 'white listed' the website to ensure unimpeded access via their networks. Visitors to www.starttheconversation.org.au are encouraged to share a link to the website via Facebook and Twitter.

Contributing to the current evidence base

[Start the conversation](#) has taken a curating role in relation to the smoking cessation evidence base. It has taken the key points of evidence and communicated them with simplicity and emotional impact to Victorian health professionals. It uses existing evidence to shift practice.

The campaign has contributed to learnings of how to engage health professionals in achieving a population health impact. Real life stories with authenticity work. A clear and achievable call to action works. A systems approach in targeting health professionals complements and even strengthens the individual behaviour change approach often seen in mass media campaigns regarding public health issues.

The broader *Supporting Patients to be Smokefree* initiative will monitor the degree of practice change within the Victorian health system associated with [start the conversation](#) and other change initiatives. [Start the conversation](#) sets a foundation for future health service action to address other modifiable risk factors in the future.

Use of effective partnerships

The most important partnership within [start the conversation](#) is the one between health professionals and patients. Without this, the campaign would have been unlikely to succeed.

[Start the conversation](#) generates an overwhelming emotional response among viewers. When played for a large audience in a strategic partnership forum, single word text2cloud responses included 'emotional', 'powerful', 'sad' 'impressive', 'moved' and 'compelling' (see Appendix 3). The campaign resonated on personal and professional levels with the government, health and community service stakeholders.

[Start the conversation](#) was released to an initial group of stakeholders via email and social media. Partners integral to the campaign's distribution included the Victorian Government, Barwon Health, Peninsula Health, Australian Medical Association, Royal Australian College of General Practice and Quit Victoria.

Louise Galloway, Senior Advisor, Department of Health and Human Services recalls the first time she viewed [start the conversation](#). *"I was overwhelmed by the personal stories and the emotional impact. It is extremely compelling viewing. I could see immediately the opportunity for this type of powerful communication to be used to address all kinds of risk factors. The message is clear: patients want and expect health professionals to ask the question. I am proud of what our partnership with Alfred Health has achieved, and I'm excited to see the difference this video is making to people's lives."*

Dr Sarah White, Director, Quit Victoria: *"To minimise the health impacts of smoking, we need to address it at every opportunity. There is no greater moment than when someone is in hospital. Alfred Health's leadership in addressing smoking as a core part of patient care has been simply outstanding. Alfred Health is a willing, generous collaborator for Quit Victoria, with the goal of benefitting the state wide health system. The approach to showing health professionals just how much patients want to quit is deceptively simple but devastatingly powerful. [Start the conversation](#) is a game-changer."*

Alfred Health will continue to work with all of its partners and stakeholders involved with [start the conversation](#) and use the campaign to drive cultural and behavioural change. To date, the use of partnerships is what has helped to make the digital communication campaign so successful. Alfred Health will continue to nurture these partnerships to drive campaign success.

5. Demonstrate value for money which encapsulates efficiency and effectiveness relative to the health outcomes achieved.

Value for money – timely outcomes

[Start the conversation](#) presents a very high value for money outcome, both in the short and long term. We are hearing from our colleagues that [start the conversation](#) is changing health professional practice. More conversations are occurring and therefore, more quit attempts are taking place. Both are clear and valuable short term outcomes.

Reflections from our health professionals confirm this impact:

Eleanor Capel Dietitian, Alfred Health says “Start the conversation really reinforced the importance of addressing smoking with all patients. It made me question my own practice and reflect on when I may have made assumptions that the conversation was not important - or I could leave it to someone else. I don’t ignore it anymore. I’m excited that the campaign can be translated to other health issues, maybe we’re not far away from health professionals raising the topic of being overweight with their patients!”

Bonnie Procko, Nurse, Alfred Health says: “The video made me realise starting the conversation is everyone’s business and that as a health professional, I need to support and encourage patients to stop smoking. I am now more comfortable with bringing up the importance of quitting with my patients, even though it can be challenging when they are stuck in a hospital bed.”

By the very nature of increased quit attempts, we will see an increased number of successful cessations. Every person who quits smoking stands to benefit personally in health, social and financial contexts and likewise at a population level.

Smoking cessation itself is known to be one of the most cost effective preventative activities we have available to us (Zwar, 2011). A campaign that increases the rate of smoking cessation is certainly of high value.

Efficiency of resource allocation

Creative costs including film production, microsite and communications collateral totaled \$35,000.

There were no costs associated with patient or health professional appearances and no costs associated with campaign advertising or distribution. It was all digital and via partners.

The high quality of the campaign created a demand for screening and sharing it by health professionals, partner organisations and even the patients who appeared within it!

Effective reach and impact

[Start the conversation](#) was created as a Victorian campaign however, its reach became international immediately. It has been included in a range of education programs and online learning modules as a key professional development tool for health professionals.

The campaign shows signs of a long life expectancy.

Alfred Health is recognised for its best practice clinical management of nicotine dependency. Via a pharmacy led clinical model, Alfred Health patients are 400% more likely to quit compared with independent attempts.

Louise Dillon, Senior Geriatrician at Alfred Health's Caulfield Hospital says: *"When I first saw the film I was extremely emotional as it brought back memories of me trying to convince my Father to stop smoking when I was a child. The one in 33 message resonates and encourages me and my colleagues to start the conversation."*

See Appendix 4 for images of patients and health professionals discussing smoking.

[Start the conversation](#) was picked up by a number of media outlets in 2014/15 as follows:

- Win TV news - spoke with Alfred's Lead for Population Health Kirstan Corben about start the conversation (30 December 2014)
- The Herald Sun – profiled start the conversation and focused on the fact the campaign is directed at clinicians rather than smokers. Alfred Health's Director of Anaesthesia and peri-operative Medicine, Professor Paul Myles commented (30 Dec 2014).
- Wimmera Mail Times – in Horsham – 'New Quit Campaign; Doctors encouraged to help smokers kick the habit' (12 Jan 2015)
- 3AW (Nick McCallum) ABC Newcastle – both interviewed Alfred Health's Director of Anaesthesia and peri-operative Medicine Professor Paul Myles (31 December 2014)
- 3AW drive - Alfred Health GP liaison Josie Samers was interview (30 December 2014)
- Perth's 6PR - Kirstan Corben, Lead for Population Health at Alfred Health discussed start the conversation (31 December 2014)
- Online article – Lung Foundation Australia: bit.ly/1Dk88IH

Associate Professor Respiratory Physician, Belinda Miller says: *"[Start the conversation](#) has provided an innovative way of showing our medical team how smoking cessation interventions can actually work. Many of our junior doctors were hesitant to discuss smoking with long-term smoking patients. They felt they lacked the skills, their advice would have no impact or patients would not be receptive. The video has given them the confidence to approach the subject with their patients so they can actively manage their smoking and nicotine dependence issues."*

We are confident start the conversation will continue well into the future, challenging and encouraging health professionals to raise the topic of smoking with their patients.

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