Diabetes and Aboriginal People

Aboriginal people are 3 to 4 times more likely than non-Aboriginal people to develop type 2 diabetes. Aboriginal people are also much more likely to experience adverse complications, such as kidney disease. There are factors contributing to the high rates of morbidity and mortality from type 2 diabetes in Aboriginal communities in Australia – these include:

1. The impact of historical and political events

Many past government policies had a negative impact on the social and cultural fabric of the Aboriginal community. The apology to Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, delivered on the 13th February 2008 by the then Prime Minister, the Hon Kevin Rudd MP, acknowledged and apologised for “…the laws and policies of successive Parliaments and governments that have inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss on these our fellow Australians”.¹

These past laws and policies included ‘protection’ acts, assimilation polices and the forced removal of children and the impacts of these historical events have filtered down from generation to generation, with profound and enduring impacts.²

Additionally, radical changes in diet, nutrition and physical activity, as a result of European settlement, have contributed to the increased burden of chronic disease.

References:

2. Low socioeconomic status

Many Aboriginal people experience disadvantage through a lack of access to education, employment, income and housing. Adults who have a low socioeconomic status are more likely to die prematurely from diabetes and have more chronic disease risk factors than those of high socioeconomic status. This is certainly the case for Aboriginal people where life expectancy is lower than in non-Aboriginal people. These factors are termed the ‘social determinants’ of health.

3. A high prevalence of risk factors for diabetes

In comparison to non-Aboriginal people, Aboriginal people have higher rates of obesity, physical inactivity, smoking, gestational diabetes, heart disease and stroke. These are all risk factors for the development of type 2 diabetes.
Recent evidence suggests that more than half (57%) of Aboriginal people aged 15 years and over are overweight or obese and, in addition to this, approximately half of Aboriginal adults are regular smokers, which is twice the rate of non-Aboriginal adults.

4. A lack of access to health services

Many Aboriginal people live in rural and remote areas of Australia where health services are limited. In combination with this, access to public transport is poor and there is an over-reliance on private vehicles which are not always available. Research has shown that the greater the distance from health services, the lower the rate of access to those health services. A reduction in access to health services has a profound effect on the prevention, detection and management of diabetes.

In urban settings, where health services are more accessible, many Aboriginal people do not access them as they may not be culturally sensitive or meet all of their needs.

5. Issues of daily stress and its relationship to diabetes management

Research shows that Aboriginal adults are twice as likely as non-Aboriginal adults to report high to very high levels of psychological distress. Aboriginal people with diabetes may be constantly living with issues causing stress and dealing with these issues takes precedence over one’s own health. This can result in the early onset of diabetes complications. Stressors include cultural, social, environmental, spiritual, emotional, economical or mental aspects, which can impact individuals, families and whole communities. Priority given to these stress factors has an influence on the urgency in which an individual seeks treatment for diabetes.

A Way Forward

There are many factors which contribute to the high prevalence of type 2 diabetes amongst Aboriginal people but addressing many of these factors is possible. Increasing awareness and understanding of diabetes amongst Aboriginal communities is an essential component in the prevention of type 2 diabetes.

Diabetes WA is committed to working across the diabetes spectrum, from prevention to tertiary management, to reduce the burden of diabetes in Aboriginal communities.

References: 2004–05 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey