

Foreword



When Australia's first Asthma Foundation was started in 1962, the body of knowledge about asthma was minimal. At best, asthma was thought to be related to allergies, and at worst it was considered to be the consequence of overprotective mothers. It became clear to the founding mothers of the Asthma Foundation that medical and scientific research was essential in order to establish a body of knowledge to separate fact from fiction. Thanks to their efforts, money was raised to lure promising young scientists away from other areas of research to study asthma. Over the years, the continuing success of asthma research has been facilitated by a range of partnerships and corporate sponsorships, as well as alliances between researchers, clinicians, professional groups, industries, governments, businesses and people with asthma and their caregivers.

Today, Australian asthma researchers are world leaders in the field. Through their leading-edge research, the impact of asthma on the Australian community has been significantly reduced over the past 40 years. But despite these advances there are still a number of questions to be answered about the causes and management of asthma. In particular, it has been recognised that our understanding of asthma and its treatment and management in older people is limited.

As the leading consumer organisations for asthma, the Asthma Foundations of Australia felt it was vital to further develop our knowledge in this area to improve the health and wellbeing of older Australians affected by asthma. With the generous support of Macquarie Bank, the 2004 Macquarie Bank Asthma Australia Research Alliance Colloquium, "Asthma and the older Australian: what we know and what we need to do", was organised specifically to improve our understanding of asthma in this age group and identify the future focus of research in this area. The Colloquium was developed based on the recommendations of the Australian Department of Health and Ageing colloquium on asthma and older Australians held in 2001.

The 2004 Colloquium, hosted by the Asthma Foundation of New South Wales, brought together leading medical researchers, academics, physicians, general practitioners and government and consumer representatives from around Australia. It highlighted the current gaps in asthma information, management and service provision targeted specifically to the needs of older Australians.

It became clear that targeted services and programs, incorporating both chronic-illness management models and health promo-

tion approaches, need to be developed and implemented for this age group. Key objectives of future programs and service delivery and design that emerged from the Colloquium were:

- to increase awareness and understanding of asthma in older Australians and their families;
- to improve accuracy of asthma diagnosis in older people in the general practice setting;
- to increase provision of specific tailored asthma management and care for older people; and
- to build the capacity and confidence of older people with asthma to manage the illness themselves.

The key to building effective programs lies in bridging the gap between the research process and the needs of older Australians living with asthma. The most effective outcomes can be achieved by actively involving older people from the beginning in the process of developing policies and programs and conducting research. This will help to ensure that the programs and services developed are relevant and useful.

To develop relevant research and effective community health programs tailored to the needs and abilities of older Australians with asthma, we first need to establish what concerns people have about the condition and what barriers prevent them from accessing the most appropriate services.

In addition to this supplement, which represents the first of the key steps forward in addressing these issues, the Asthma Foundations of Australia are in the process of developing an "Asthma and older Australians" program, based on the issues identified in the Colloquium. It is the first program tailored specifically to addressing the needs of older people with asthma.

I look forward to the outcomes of this initiative, which will be commended to the Australian Government as a national health initiative and has the potential to significantly improve the health of older Australians with asthma. I also look forward to the future plans of the "Healthy Ageing, Healthy Airways" working party, which was formed to further the work begun at the Colloquium.

I would like to thank everyone who helped make the Colloquium a resounding success and know that the findings presented here will be a catalyst for addressing the growing issue of asthma among older Australians.

Peter Adamson

President, Asthma Foundations of Australia