

## Introduction

Asthma and airway diseases are a significant problem for older Australians. They cause a large burden of illness in the community, and in primary care settings they present particular problems for diagnosis and management. Despite this, much of what we now know and do for asthma in older Australians is based on studies conducted in young people with asthma, and these findings may be of limited relevance.

The impact of comorbid conditions and cumulative exposure to risk factors such as smoking may alter the clinical expression and course of asthma in older people. These aspects, when combined with differing social settings and physical function of older Australians, suggest the need for a different approach to asthma in older people. The 2004 Macquarie Bank Asthma Australia Research Alliance Colloquium (held in Katoomba, NSW, 29–31 October 2004) sought to investigate this problem by challenging researchers from a variety of disciplines — including respiratory medicine, primary care, geriatric medicine, basic science, pharmacology, social science, as well as consumer representatives — to consider the theme of “Asthma

and the older Australian”. Participants focused on what we need to know and what we need to do to better understand and manage asthma in the elderly. The contributions in this supplement are a rich tapestry reflecting the diversity of issues and the diverse backgrounds of the Colloquium participants. Several key themes emerge that highlight the need to better understand how the lung ages, the nature of airway disease in older people, the impact of age and comorbidity on asthma, and the need to improve diagnosis of asthma in older people. The outcomes provide a research agenda to address what is a growing problem in the Australian community.

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