he NSW Health Department has released a report
- Health in New South Wales: Current indicators
- containing health information on NSW residents.
The report has three main aims: 1) to enable readers
to identify the key health problems of particular age
groups without having to consult multiple data
sources; 2) to stimulate efforts to improve current
health indicators; and, 3) to focus further research
on preventable illness and death.

Data in the report are derived from Australian
Bureau of Statistics mortality data through 1988,
the NSW Health Department's Inpatient Statistics
Collection (1988/89), Infectious Disease Notification
file (1990) and the 1983 Australian Health Survey. In
addition to mortality, birth and perinatal mortality
rates (health indicators used by WHO) the report
includes rates for hospital admissions, reported
episodes of illness and general practitioner visits
and infectious diseases.

Mortality rates are the most widely used indicator
of population health. People in NSW are living
longer than before: in the past two decades the
expectation of life increased by 4.5 years for both men
and women. The average expectation of life at birth
for men is 73 years and for women 79 years. This
gender differential has been present since the turn
of the century.

The cause of death is highly age-specific. The leading
causes of death in NSW are circulatory diseases and
cancer and almost three-quarters of such deaths occur
among those aged 65 years and over. Accordingly, the report focuses on age and sex groups within the
population.

Babies and children under five years form a special
group. Great gains have been made in preventing
foetal and neonatal deaths: the mortality rate fell
from 59.4 per thousand births in 1936 to 12.5 in
1988. But the perinatal period remains the most
hazardous: in 1988, most infants (aged less than
one year) who died did so as a result of perinatal
disorders, and most of the remainder as a result
of congenital anomalies and ill-defined conditions.
Perinatal disorders also accounted for 19 per cent of
hospital admissions of babies and children under five
years. Respiratory problems were the major cause
and diarrhoea and other gastro-intestinal tract
problems caused a further 10 per cent.

Injury was the major cause of death among children
over one year, adolescents and adults under 25 years.
Motor vehicle accidents were the largest cause of
injury but suicides and other causes of injury, such
as falls, made sizeable contributions to the injury
mortality rate. For all the age groups the male rate
far exceeded that for females. Not surprisingly, injury
was also the leading cause of hospital admission in
these age groups.

Cancer emerged as an important cause of death after
the age of 25 years: in the age group 25-44, cancer
caused 23 per cent of deaths, in the group 45-64 years
39 per cent, and in those over 64 years 22 per cent.
But cancer accounted for only 10 per cent and 11
per cent of hospital separations in the two older
age groups.

Cardio-vascular disorders became an increasingly
important cause of death and hospital admission
with age. From causing one in six deaths at age
25-44 years, circulatory disorders caused 39 per cent
of deaths at age 45-64 years and 56 per cent of deaths
among those over 64 years. However, as found in
cancer, circulatory disorders accounted for far smaller
percentages of hospital separations: 13 per cent of
those aged 45-64 years and 20 per cent of those older
than 64 years. These were still leading causes, but
many other conditions which did not cause death
causd hospitalisation. Prominent among the latter
was gastro-intestinal disorders, which accounted for
significant hospital admissions in all age groups.

The rate of hospitalisation increased with age, and
the male rate was higher than the female in infants
and children, and in the elderly (over 64 years).
Between 15 and 44 years the female rate was higher
but most of this excess was pregnancy-related or due
to genito-urinary disorders. Again, the older the
patient, the longer the average hospital stay.

The Australian Health Survey showed that 57 per
cent of males and 67 per cent of females reported
having experienced some form of illness in the
fortnight preceding the survey, and reported having
had one doctor consultation for every 3.6 of these
illness experiences. Headache, insomnia, asthma,
influenza, arthritis, hypertension and back trouble
were the main conditions reported. While not usually
life-threatening, such conditions, especially if chronic,
may interfere with the quality of life.

Increased efforts are under way to improve our
measurement of health so we can better assess
the efficacy of health interventions in NSW.

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