Rural Kiwis higher health risk

Study finds higher levels of dangerous diseases

By JEREMY SMITH

People living in some rural areas have higher rates of diseases including heart problems, kidney failure, cancer and breathing problems, initial findings from a five-year study by the New Zealand Institute of Rural Health suggest.

The study by the institute, which has an office in Cambridge, is called the Rural Health Indicator Project and it aims to compare the health of people living in rural areas with that of their urban counterparts.

The focus was to measure various aspects of health and delivery of secondary level care, or care that includes diagnosis and treatment performed in a hospital.

Those living in independent urban areas were most at risk.

Such areas were classed as rural by the National Health Committee.

Based on a Statistics New Zealand classification, the project defined an independent urban area as an area which has relatively insignificant connections to main urban areas, is a service centre for surrounding rural areas and has an interdependent relationship with rural communities.

Independent urban areas in the Waikato include Matamata, Morrinsville, Paeroa, Te Aroha, Te Kuiti, Coromandel, Tokoroa, Thames and Taumarunui.

The institute's findings were based on selecting five district health boards – Northland, Waikato, Taranaki, Canterbury and Southern (or Otago and Southland) and looking at several key areas including disease, death, incidence of potentially avoidable death, deaths that weren't seen as avoidable and secondary care activity levels.

ROBIN STEED

Secondary care includes discharges from hospitals, the length of the stays of inpatients and day patients and case-weighted discharges.

The study also looked at four diseases overall: cardiovascular or heart disease, malignancy or cancer, renal disease or kidney failure and respiratory or breathing problems.

Data was analysed from 2005-2009.

Once complete the project will demonstrate the health status of the five selected district health boards and their health services for rural people compared to those who live in urban areas.

According to initial findings from the project that were recently released to *Rural Delivery* heart disease was the leading cause of death in all five district health boards and it also contributed to people dying early. The study found that the leading heart disease was ischaemic heart disease, essentially reduced blood supply to the heart, followed by strokes, which were the greatest form of disability in older people.

The second leading cause of death, or 27 per cent, according to the findings of the report was cancer, which was also a major reason people were admitted to hospital.

As well as independent urban areas showing higher levels of cancer, heart disease, kidney failure and breathing issues than in urban areas, the number of inpatients, the adjusted length of stay and the case weighted discharges also appeared greater.

New Zealand Institute of Rural Heath chief executive Robin Steed said results already suggested access to hospitals and specialists may be some factors putting pressure on the health and wellbeing of rural dwellers. She said maintaining primary care health workforces would remain crucial to keeping rural dwellers well.

"This rural health indicator project will complement work already being undertaken by the institute in a seven-year programme for DairyNZ, regarding the health and wellbeing of dairy farmers in New Zealand.

"Later this year work will most likely begin on looking at the rural areas where specific health issues are over represented, which will include raising awareness of particular issues and culminate in co-ordinating greater health support in rural areas identified."

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