Anaesthetists tackle the “Titanic” problem of smoking and surgery

Anaesthetists across Australia and New Zealand are being urged to get involved in helping patients stop smoking before they enter the operating theatre.

The call comes as the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists (ANZCA) releases its guidelines on the dangers of smoking and anaesthesia on National Anaesthesia Day (Thursday October 16).

ANZCA President, Dr Genevieve Goulding, said anaesthetists were uniquely placed to reduce patient smoking rates by asking patients about their smoking status as soon as they were listed for elective surgery.

“Smoking leads to more complications during and after an operation,” Dr Goulding said.

“It starves the body of oxygen, makes it more difficult to breathe during and after surgery and can lead to blood clots.

“Smokers also have more trouble recovering.”

ANZCA’s finalised guidelines on smoking state “ANZCA ... recognises that the perioperative period represents a ‘teachable moment’ when many smokers quit or attempt to quit smoking, sometimes permanently” and that it is never too late to quit.

Dr Goulding said of giving up smoking:

• After 24 hours, blood pressure improves and more oxygen will reach the heart.

• After one week, lungs are better at removing mucus, tar and dust.

• After three to four weeks, the body is better at fighting wound infections.

Tobacco use is the single greatest preventable cause of death and disease in Australia and New Zealand. At least half of all smokers will eventually die as a result of their smoking – 15,500 deaths annually in Australia are attributable to tobacco and 5000 in New Zealand.

“It is the equivalent of the RMS Titanic sinking in the Tasman Sea every month,” said Dr Ashley Webb, the lead author of ANZCA’s Guidelines on Smoking as Related to the Perioperative Period.

“More than 300,000 smokers have elective surgery across Australian and New Zealand every year, which represents many opportunities for anaesthetists to talk to patients.
“On National Anaesthesia Day (Thursday October 16) we encourage all anaesthetists to follow the simple steps known as AAR: Ask their patients about their smoking status, Advise them on the risks and Refer them to smoking cessation support.

“Many patients are not aware of the risks smoking poses to their operation, risks associated with anaesthesia itself and also with surgical recovery.

“Hearing about those risks from their anaesthetist is a powerful incentive to give up smoking.”

- For more information on National Anaesthesia Day activities and events in hospitals across Australia and New Zealand or for interviews about why every smoker should quit before an anaesthetic, please contact ANZCA Media Manager Ebru Yaman on +61 408 259 369 or via communications@anzca.edu.au. Follow us on Twitter @ANZCA.