

Saving lives

Asthma is a debilitating condition that affects a growing number of people in New Zealand and many other countries. The global scientific effort to find remedies has produced a number of asthma drugs, many of which have made it easier for sufferers to lead their lives undisturbed by the disease. But during the 1970s and 1980s, many asthmatics died and New Zealand acquired a reputation as the country with the highest number of asthma-related deaths. This time, scientists had to stand up against their own peers to solve the tragic situation.

For a long time it was unclear why asthma should kill more people in New Zealand than elsewhere, until a group of epidemiologists found a link with the drug fenoterol. Through a series of clinical studies they could show that fenoterol had more side-effects than similar drugs, and an analysis of time trends suggested that the mortality epidemic started when the drug was introduced to New Zealand in 1976.



The scientists put their reputations and careers on the line when they published the results of their work, which clearly linked an asthmatic's prescription of fenoterol with a heightened risk of death. One of the scientists involved, Professor Neil Pearce, says the study was controversial at the time and drew criticism from within and outside New Zealand.

But once the work was published and the drug restricted, the death rate fell immediately and is now the lowest it has been in 50 years. Subsequent studies overseas confirmed the link and the drug manufacturer has now halved the dose per puff worldwide.

However, asthma is still on the increase and Professor Pearce's work now concentrates on finding out why. He has found that the condition is particularly prevalent – and on the increase – in the so-called westernised countries. Again, the results of his work are not without controversy, as he has found a link between asthma and what most would see as the benefits of civilisation.

