

1 Introduction

In 1987 the Department of Community Services and Health (now the Department of Health and Aged Care) commissioned a study to determine methods for quantifying drug caused morbidity and mortality in Australia. The study was undertaken by Dr D'Arcy Holman (then director of the Epidemiology Branch of the Health Department of Western Australia) and Professor Bruce Armstrong (then Professor of Epidemiology and Cancer Research and Director of the National Health and Medical Research Council's Research Unit in Epidemiology and Preventive Medicine at the University of Western Australia). The primary objective of the project was to estimate the number of drug-caused deaths, hospital separations, patient days and years of life lost.

The resultant report was released by the Department of Community Services and Health in 1990 in conjunction with a departmental document that included modifications to the methods and time-series estimates of drug-caused deaths in Australia (Holman et al. 1990). The report dealt with harmful (and protective) effects attributed to three main drug groupings: alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drugs. It presented the proportion of cases attributed to the drug (called the *aetiological fraction*) for a comprehensive list of illnesses and causes of death or injury.

In view of the considerable research knowledge that accumulated after the publication of the Holman et al. report, the Department of Human Services and Health (as it was then known) commissioned a second study to revise and update the original methods and to apply the updated methods to more recent data. This study was undertaken by Dr Dallas English (Senior Lecturer in the Department of Public Health in the University of Western Australia) and Professor D'Arcy Holman (by this time Professor in the Department of Public Health in the University of Western Australia). Their report presented fully revised aetiological fractions for tobacco, alcohol and illicit drugs, along with estimates of the attributable hospital separations and patient days, deaths and potential years of life lost in Australia in 1992 (English et al. 1995).

In 1997 the Department of Health and Family Services (as it was then known) commissioned a further revision of the aetiological fractions methodology as part of the Memorandum of Understanding between the Department and the Institute. This report presents the results of the revision, along with estimates for 1998 (for mortality) and 1997-98 (for hospital separations). As with the previous two studies, this report uses the ninth revision of the World Health Organization's International Classification of Diseases (ICD-9) to classify causes of death, illness and injury.