

What's wrong with men's health?

The most recent statistics available indicate that children born in Australia in 2007 could expect to live 81 years. For longevity we rate number four in the world, just behind Japan, Iceland and Switzerland, and well ahead of Swaziland which comes last on the list at 179 with a life expectancy of under 40 years.

It's a slightly better report card for Australia than we had 10 years ago when it was suggested a child born in 1997 might average 78 years on earth.

However, there seems to be some gender inequity in all this living business. Australian men haven't quite broken the 80 year barrier, while girls born today are likely to be around for another 84 years.

It probably comes as no surprise to learn that men generally indulge in more risky behaviour than do women; and this behaviour pattern has been the case for many centuries.

Perhaps this is one reason why men don't last quite as long as women. Compared with women, men are much more likely to die in accidents – traffic or work related accidents – and be the victims of homicide or suicide. But the fact that some men occasionally behave quite badly is not the only reason that in Australia women live longer than men. This five year gap is quite common in other parts of the world as well; but the reason differs from country to country.

According to the International Classification of Diseases Code, diseases are categorised into three groups. Firstly, there are infectious or communicable diseases such as HIV/AIDS, TB, malaria, hepatitis, pneumonia and even swine flu. Secondly, there are non-communicable diseases like asthma, diabetes and heart disease. And lastly, there are injuries and accidents.

Around 30 or 40 years ago we expected that by the turn of the century, we'd pretty much have infections under control; but with new infectious diseases appearing, the problems associated with these diseases are becoming more prevalent and injury rates are increasing.

So, when young Australian men survive their aggressive adolescence, they are still more likely to indulge in dangerous lifestyle pursuits – smoking, eating and drinking to excess and exercising too little.

Currently, we can also blame the world economy – at least to some extent. Self esteem, or lack of it, has an effect on men's health; a critical issue in these times of employment and financial uncertainty. When men feel they have no control over their lives they are sometimes burdened with feelings of guilt and shame.

One out of every six Australian men suffers from depression at any give time. And male depression is associated with an increased risk of major health disorders.

International Men's Health Week (IMHW) is celebrated in June each year, with the aim to increase community awareness of men's health issues. Too often, it seems, the topic of men's health is confined to discussion of conditions such as erectile dysfunction, prostate problems or male pattern baldness, while overlooking diseases such as heart disease, diabetes and bowel cancer. There are some alarming statistics on the IMHW website (www.menshealthweekaustralia.org). More than 40% of Australian men over 40 suffer a serious health problem. Men under 75 years of age are almost three times more likely to die from heart disease, stroke or blood vessel disease than women in the same age group; and alcohol misuse results in about 3,000 deaths and 65,000 hospitalisations every year.

It's fair to say that women appear to have biological advantage over men; women seem to have a stronger immune system; and the hormone oestrogen protects against heart disease and stroke – at least until after the menopause.

However, men are less inclined to visit the doctor, whether that be when they are ill, or just to have a regular check-up. They're very much aware of the need for motor vehicle or other machinery maintenance, but ignore the need to protect their bodies from abuse, misuse or age-related deterioration.

As a first step in closing the five year gap, all men, and women who care about them, could check out the series of men's health fact cards. They're available from all pharmacies around Australia providing the Self Care health information. Call the Pharmaceutical Society (PSA) on 1 300 369 772 or log on to the PSA website at www.psa.org.au for the nearest location.