

Stop Smoking Services and Health Inequalities

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Executive summary

- Rates of smoking have declined in the UK in recent years, but the rate of decline has been significantly slower in more disadvantaged groups
- Health inequalities in the UK are widening according to some important measures, such as life expectancy
- Smoking is the single biggest preventable cause of these health inequalities
- Stop smoking services 'reach' a significant number of disadvantaged smokers, even in areas with high smoking prevalence. The services treat a higher proportion of smokers eligible for free prescriptions and who are unemployed than are found among the general population
- Despite this, smokers from disadvantaged areas find it more difficult to stop with the help of stop smoking services than their more affluent neighbours
- These differences in chances of quitting successfully appear to be due to: lack of social support, higher nicotine dependency, challenging life circumstances and factors relating to the stop smoking services themselves
- Ensuring that disadvantaged smokers make full use of stop smoking medications (e.g. combination therapy or varenicline) and group support (possibly rolling drop-in groups) may help stop smoking services increase the quit rates amongst less affluent smokers
- Stop smoking services in their current form contribute to reducing health inequalities; this impact could be even greater if more disadvantaged smokers contacted the services and if the services maximised the chances of those quitters being successful through promoting use of the most effective medications (combination NRT and varenicline) and using more tailored and flexible approaches

Stop Smoking Services and Health Inequalities

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In the UK, health inequalities (the differences in health between people of higher and lower socioeconomic status),¹ are widening on some important measures such as life expectancy.^{2–6} Smoking is the single biggest preventable cause of these health inequalities and is responsible for about half the difference in death rates in men by socioeconomic status.⁷ These inequalities have a cost for both society and the individual. Health inequalities in England alone cause productivity losses of £31–33 billion every year, £20–32 billion per year in lost taxes and higher welfare payments and additional NHS healthcare costs in excess of £5.5 billion per year.² The cost of tobacco represents a higher proportion of household income amongst poorer smokers, meaning that their tobacco use not only damages their health but also contributes to trapping people in poverty.⁸

Reaching smokers

When stop smoking services were first established in England in 1999–2000, they were piloted in areas of deprivation (Health Action Zones).⁹ It was intended that the services would prioritise supporting less affluent smokers to quit in recognition of smoking's contribution to causing health inequalities. Even when stop smoking services were rolled out across the country in subsequent years, this early emphasis on supporting more disadvantaged smokers to quit remained. Research was conducted that assessed the extent to which stop smoking services were effective in more deprived communities. This research was commissioned in the knowledge that most health services are more accessible to more affluent groups – often referred to as the 'inverse care law'. Studies of stop smoking services showed that in contrast to other health interventions, they were effective at both reaching and treating disadvantaged groups. A study conducted in 2001–2 in a representative sample of 19 out of 25 English health authorities found that around one in three stop smoking service clients lived in the most disadvantaged quintile of communities, compared to one in ten clients who were from the most advantaged quintile.¹⁰ The study found 'effectiveness of reach' in all 19 areas, meaning that services were reaching many more disadvantaged smokers than might have been expected even in areas with high smoking prevalence. This suggested that stop smoking services were being successful in reversing the 'inverse care law'.

A more recent study reached similar conclusions. This research analysed stop smoking service records for 202,084 smokers who set quit dates between July 2010 and June 2011 in 49 services.¹¹ The services were reaching disadvantaged groups: 59% of clients were eligible for free prescriptions when about 50% of the general population are eligible.¹² In addition, 14% were unemployed when the unemployment rate nationally was 8%.

Stop Smoking Services and Health Inequalities

There remains a concern about whether services are reaching the *most* disadvantaged smokers however; pilot projects exploring how to reach disadvantaged groups and encourage cessation¹³⁻¹⁹ suggested that disadvantaged smokers may not be being targeted effectively due to the pressure of service targets for the number of four-week quitters. Opportunities to enrol disadvantaged smokers in treatment may exist through stop smoking services working with other organisations, such as children's centres, mental health services and criminal justice services. The pilot projects indicates, however, that these organisations may not be promoting quitting or referring to stop smoking services effectively: smoking status was not recorded systematically and staff were not sufficiently engaged with smoking as a priority health issue. Suggested solutions included raising smoking cessation along with other health issues, starting by advising on smokefree homes rather than directly with cessation, using carbon monoxide (CO) monitoring to identify 'hidden' smokers and opt-out referrals. However, although the use of opt-out referral systems increased the numbers of referrals, because stop smoking services were not necessarily set up to deal with these the conversion to quit attempts was low.

Trying and succeeding in stopping smoking

Despite the fact that stop smoking services are successfully reaching disadvantaged smokers, a consistent finding has been that these smokers find it more difficult to stop than their more affluent neighbours. This has been found in studies that have looked at both short and long term outcomes for clients.

For example, in the study of over 200,000 smokers already mentioned above, clients from routine and manual occupations were less likely to have quit than clients from managerial and professional occupations (Odds Ratio=1.14 (1.10 to 1.18)). Clients who paid prescription charges (and were therefore more likely to be working) were more likely to quit (Odds Ratio=1.18 (1.14 to 1.21)) than those who were exempt.¹¹ Similar results were found in studies that have looked at one year quit rates for clients of stop smoking services. Clients with the highest socioeconomic position were twice as likely to quit compared with smokers in the lowest position at two services in England; and five times more likely to quit when using a pharmacy based service in Glasgow.²⁰

Why do we see this difference in success rates? We know that smokers from varied social groups are just as motivated to stop smoking and just as likely to try and stop^{21, 22} so the difference in success rates is not due to lack of trying. Instead, research points to a number of other explanations including: lack of social support, higher nicotine dependency, challenging life circumstances and factors relating to stop smoking services themselves.

Stop Smoking Services and Health Inequalities

First, less affluent smokers may find quitting more difficult because they have fewer people supporting their quit attempt.^{23, 24} Lack of support may be because they are living in a household with other smokers, or that friends and family are smokers.²⁵ There is also some evidence that less affluent smokers regard smoking as more common in the general population than statistics suggest and thus they may feel less social pressures not to smoke.²⁶ These types of influences can make quitting more difficult. Conversely, we know that positive social support (from non-smoking friends and family or from others trying to quit at the same time for example) can make a real difference to those trying to stop.²⁷

Nicotine dependency also has a role to play. A number of studies have found that less affluent smokers are more highly dependent on the nicotine in cigarettes.^{28, 29} This may be partly the result of smokers from a lower socioeconomic position taking up smoking earlier and smoking more cigarettes per day.³⁰ Nicotine addiction can make cutting down as well as quitting more difficult, and studies have shown that smokers with higher levels of nicotine addiction and less affluent smokers, smoke each cigarette more completely and make take deeper drags on the cigarette than less dependent smokers.^{29, 31, 32}

Difficult or challenging life circumstances can also make quitting more difficult. Less affluent smokers are more likely to cite being nervous, restless or depressed as a reason for relapse than more affluent smokers.^{33, 34} In addition, lower socioeconomic status can be associated with work environments with higher levels of boredom and stress³⁵ and more stressful living environments inside the home and in the neighbourhood. This may lead to smokers having more immediate concerns that supersede smoking cessation^{17, 24, 36, 37}; smokers in these situations can view smoking as a way of enabling them to cope.^{38, 39}

Finally, how stop smoking services are used or what forms of behavioural support they offer may play a role in differences in quit rates. In a study looking at one year outcomes for clients using services, researchers found that disadvantaged smokers were less likely to use pharmacotherapy (such as NRT or varenicline) for long enough or to attend sessions regularly.²⁰ This finding is supported by other smoking cessation studies that have found that lower income smokers are more likely to discontinue pharmacotherapy early⁴⁰ and are less likely to complete the behavioural support programme.⁴¹ Attending a higher proportion of sessions of behavioural support to stop smoking is associated with higher chances of quitting, as is using the correct dose of stop smoking medication for long enough to address cravings and withdrawal symptoms.^{42, 43} In addition, in a more recent study, more affluent smokers were more likely to attend group rather than one to one support, and groups were associated with higher quit rates. When this was examined more closely, it was found that drop in rolling groups may be a particularly promising form of behavioural support for more disadvantaged clients, possibly because this more flexible type of support may be better suited to their life circumstances.⁴⁴

Stop Smoking Services and Health Inequalities

Given that socioeconomic disadvantage is associated with heavier smoking and higher nicotine dependence, it has been suggested that more flexible interventions which encourage smokers to gradually cut down before quitting rather than quit abruptly may be helpful.¹⁶ Engagement with services generally lasts less than 12 weeks and disadvantaged smokers may need longer term support; a text messaging relapse prevention service where clients were contacted up to 6 months after their quit date was well received among a sample of clients of whom 43% were defined as lower socioeconomic status.¹⁹

Can stop smoking services reduce inequalities?

The research we have to date shows that stop smoking services are already making an important contribution to reducing smoking including in less affluent groups. One study showed that stop smoking services can make a significant contribution to reducing the health inequalities caused by smoking.⁹ It found that short-term cessation rates were lower in disadvantaged areas (53%) than elsewhere (58%) ($p < 0.001$). However, the proportion of smokers being treated by services in more deprived areas was higher than that in less disadvantaged areas (17% compared with 13%) ($p < 0.001$). Thus the overall effect was that a higher proportion of smokers in the most disadvantaged areas reported abstinence from smoking (8.8%) than in more advantaged areas (7.8%) ($p < 0.001$).

In addition all the factors outlined above, that explain lower quit rates amongst disadvantaged clients, are modifiable. Services can work with smokers to identify the life circumstances that serve as barriers to quitting. They can also provide information and support to maximise the chances that those trying to quit will use pharmacotherapy correctly and for long enough. In addition, they can offer different forms of behavioural support, such as drop in rolling groups in a range of accessible venues, to try and meet the needs of varied client groups. This type of action can help to ensure that stop smoking services continue to play an important role in driving down smoking rates, particularly in those communities where tobacco takes the highest toll.

Stop Smoking Services and Health Inequalities

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Stop Smoking Services and Health Inequalities

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