

**Smoking Kills: The Introduction of Tobacco Smoking into Aboriginal Society with a particular focus on the Hunter Region of Central Eastern New South Wales from 1800 to 1850**

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**Abstract**

This paper brings to the reader's attention a history of tobacco smoking that arguably had a negative effect on the health of Aboriginal communities in the Hunter region of central eastern New South Wales during the early colonial contact period from 1800 to 1850. Furthermore, it will also be shown that tobacco was used by colonists to engage the services of Aboriginal people, not only in Aboriginal communities in the Hunter region, but further afield across many other frontiers of colonial expansion in Australia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It will be demonstrated through primary archival and secondary sources that colonists utilised tobacco as a coercive agent to appease, befriend, pacify, coerce and remunerate Aboriginal People, resulting in widespread addiction. It is argued that tobacco smoking not only undermined the health of traditional communities, but also this unhealthy habit has been largely overlooked in measurements of the impact of colonization on the health of Indigenous people. While historians widely acknowledge that exotic diseases such as smallpox had a negative effect on the health of Aboriginal People, it is rarely considered in contemporary historical accounts that tobacco had an even more insidious effect on the well being of Aboriginal societies during the early colonial contact period. Furthermore, while diseases such as smallpox have hopefully disappeared forever, health destroyers like tobacco have endured and continue to impact on Aboriginal health. Finally, this paper recognises the enormity of challenges faced by health authorities, and indeed Indigenous Australians, in contemporary society in combating a chronic problem that has been embedded in Aboriginal post-colonial culture during the long course of European occupation.

**Introduction**

Tobacco is derived from the dried leaves of various plant species, including *Nicotiana tabacum* and is hazardous to human health. When tobacco is inhaled by smoking, a poisonous alkaloid enters the bloodstream releasing harmful carcinogenic chemicals into the body (E. Martin 2007, 718, 719). Regular habitual smoking of tobacco is also highly addictive, causing physical dependency with unpleasant withdrawal symptoms on cessation. The dangers and problems of tobacco smoking are well documented in a literature review carried out by the Centre for Excellence in Indigenous Tobacco Control which also shows that smoking tobacco is very harmful to human health ([www.chs.unimelb.edu.au/programs/indtobacco](http://www.chs.unimelb.edu.au/programs/indtobacco)).

Prior to permanent European occupation from 1788 it would seem that Aboriginal People predominantly chewed a native tobacco. Alan and Joan Cribb state in *Wild Medicines in Australia* that a variety of native tobacco plants were generally chewed by Indigenous Australians until "the white man introduced the smoking habit to the Aborigines" (Cribb 1981, 171-172). However, there were exceptions. Anthropologist Josephine Flood states that Macassans from Asia introduced wood pipes for smoking tobacco to Aboriginal Australians in Northern Australia (Flood 2006, 8). C. Macknight (1976) supports Flood's claim that tobacco smoking was introduced by Macassans and adds that tobacco and pipes were exchanged with Aboriginal Australians for the right to harvest trepang in the waters of Northern Australia. Nevertheless, it would appear that the use of tobacco by Aboriginal

People was mainly restricted to chewing, not smoking, in most parts of Australia before European arrival on the First Fleet in 1788, including the Hunter region.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, "Tobacco use is a particular concern for the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, amongst whom smoking prevalence is more than double that of the non-Indigenous population". Cardiovascular disease, diabetes, hypertension, emphysema, lung cancer and early death are closely associated with tobacco smoking (DoHa 2006). While I do not intend to prove a link between the present and the past regarding tobacco, the allusion is offered to the reader to consider that the high incidence of smoking in current Indigenous society has a relationship with the past. Ongoing socio-economic disadvantage as a consequence of colonisation see many Indigenous Australians firmly entrenched in a vicious cycle of poverty characterised by high unemployment, over representation in the criminal justice system and low education attainment. If closing the 20 year gap in life expectancy for Indigenous Australians is a serious national priority, then it is worthwhile examining the origins of tobacco smoking in Indigenous communities to gain greater understanding of this health problem, which arguably is a major contributor to this inequity.

### **The introduction of tobacco, Aboriginal People and the Hunter region 1800-1850**

The commercial cultivation of tobacco in Australia by European colonists commenced at Emu Plains in 1803. A prominent colonist called Sir John Jamieson saw the potential "of the plant as a commodity of commerce and so introduced it on his estates" (Ryan 1982, 217). One of the earliest records of colonists supplying tobacco to Aboriginal People in the Hunter region is found in a despatch from Governor Phillip Gidley King to Lieutenant Charles Menzies in 1804. Menzies, who is the inaugural commandant of the newly established penal colony at Newcastle, is informed in this despatch that King had met several Aboriginal People from Newcastle who had travelled by boat to Sydney. In this despatch it is revealed that King provides several gifts to these Aboriginal men, including a large quantity of tobacco to be distributed at Menzies's discretion to Aboriginal People at Newcastle. King writes to Menzies on 24 May 1804:

Six Natives from your neighbourhood have come here soon after you Settled, they now return with Bongaru in the Resource, I have directed them to be Victualled for Six Days and given them a Jacket, Cap, Blanket, and 4 lbs. of Tobacco each, the latter Article is sent to you to divide among them. I hope the Observations those People have made here will when they arrive with their Friends be of use, and am gratified that you continue on such good footing with them, to encourage which I am sure you will omit no means in your Power. (Library Committee of the Commonwealth Parliament 1915, 413-414)

King's strategy is straightforward. Tobacco was used as a means of fostering positive relations with Aboriginal People at Newcastle during the first few months of colonial occupation. In total, King had given Menzies a large amount of an addictive substance to deal out to Aboriginal People. While it is not directly stated in the despatches between King and Menzies, it can be inferred that the Newcastle commandant was provided with tobacco to engage the services of Aboriginal People. There is evidence that Menzies intends to exploit Aboriginal labour. For example, he writes to King that in transporting convicts from the gaol to islands at the mouth of the Hunter River "...the Natives would take them across in their Canoes" ( Library Committee of the Commonwealth Parliament 1915, 407-408). In order to obtain these services, it is probable that tobacco would have been used as an incentive to engage these local Aboriginal People.

It is difficult to assess the extent of tobacco consumption by Aboriginal People during the first decade of the penal colony at Newcastle from 1805 to 1814 due to the paucity of available archival records, most of which were destroyed in a fire (Windross & Ralston 1978, 9). However, it can be determined from the Bigge Report (1819-1821) that Aboriginal People received tobacco payments for services from the authorities at the penal colony. On 18 January 1818, Sergeant John Evans who was stationed at Newcastle provided evidence to the Bigge Inquiry that Aboriginal men were paid with tobacco for recapturing escaped convicts. Evans states that, "They surround them with their spears and than make them strip their clothes. They bring them into the settlement and than ask for a reward, which is given to them in tobacco or corn or a piece of blanket" (Turner 1973, 95).

It would seem that during the reign of the penal colony, tobacco was imported into the Hunter region from Sydney (Turner, 63). However, when the penal colony is transferred to Port Macquarie in 1822, the region is opened for colonial occupation, leading to a massive influx of colonists into the Hunter. This change in colonial policy has huge repercussions for Aboriginal People because it marked the beginning of large scale frontier conflict with Aboriginal dispossession of lands and waterways. Colonial surveyor Henry Dangar writes:

The district of the Hunter's river (with which I have been connected) may be taken as an example, here, from March 1822 to November 1826, when I left the surveys of that district, the amazing extent of 372,141 acres were appropriated to settlers; 132,164 acres were allotted for church and school purposes; to which may be added 100,000 acres which were surveyed and not appropriated; making altogether 604, 305 acres. In this division of country, occupying upwards of 150 miles along the river, which in 1822, possessed little more than its aboriginal inhabitants, in 1826-27, more than half a million of acres were appropriated and in a forward state of improvement. (Dangar 1828, 127-128)

Frontier conflict marred race relations as conflict over land and resources escalated between colonists and Aboriginal People. Reverend Threlkeld sums up the position of race relations in the Hunter when he writes a letter to the London Missionary Society on 11 September 1826 which states:

You will be grieved to hear that war has commenced and still continues against the Aborigines of this land.- Yesterday a party of 40 Soldiers were ordered to the interior but only 18 could be spared, three families have suffered by the Blacks, but the particulars I cannot yet ascertain- Lieutenant Lowe who shot his prisoner is now come down again for investigation respecting his conduct- but he will be exonerated- as all the Magistrates have previously signed a letter thanking him for his conduct in taking upon himself the responsibility of shooting his prisoner while in safe custody- The whole of the outrages may be traced to this and another circumstance-Many lives will be lost on both sides and the Blacks threaten to Burn the Corn as it ripens-this will ruin the colony at once. (Gunson 1974, 214)

Amidst the turmoil of frontier conflict, the traditional economy and lifestyle of Aboriginal People in the Hunter region fell into disarray. The rapid influx of colonists, usurpation of land in the form of Crown Land Grants and burgeoning pastoral and agricultural industry created a strong demand for labour. One colonist of the 1820s wrote of the attractions of the Hunter which depict an environment which undoubtedly provided a healthy environment to Aboriginal People prior to the invasion:

The population will flourish most in the fertile and accessible parts of the colony, is amply proved by the present well peopled districts of Morpeth and St. Patrick's Plain, which not settled half the time that Bathurst has been, the number of inhabitants on those two spots is already larger than the entire population of Bathurst.

The River Hunter, though so forbidding at its mouth, and as far up as the water continues salt, shows afterwards that we must not judge by first appearances. From its great extent, excellent natural pastures, fruitful soil, good water, delightful climate, easy travelling, picturesque scenery, salt, coal, cedar, building timber, and three navigable rivers, Hunter's River will be the garden of New South Wales. (Mackaness 1965, 194)

From this time, intense domestic cultivation of tobacco commences in the Hunter Valley and Port Stephens. According to Hunter Valley colonist Surgeon Peter Cunningham, "Both soil and climate" were highly suitable "for tobacco." (Cunningham 1966, 90). At Maitland, cultivation produced a "splendid tobacco...equal to the best American in appearance, though perhaps not quite so good in quality, but it took excellent judges to discriminate" (Ryan 1982, 218). Domestic productivity rapidly increased to a stage where Cunningham believed it would soon diminish the need for imports. He wrote, "I think in a few years the colonial tobacco will, in a great measure, supersede the foreign; and as all the lower classes are determined smokers, there is consequently an immense consumption" (Cunningham 1966, 132). Hundreds of colonists commenced growing tobacco and Cunningham could "see no reason why its importation should not be totally prohibited", thus allowing protection and growth of local industry (ibid. 218). In the mid 1820s it was believed that as much as 60,000 pounds of tobacco was being consumed annually, such was the craving for this highly addictive substance in the colony (ibid. 352).

On 15 November 1825, Reverend Lancelot Threlkeld, a missionary sent by the London Missionary Society to attend the welfare of Aboriginal people at Lake Macquarie, observed the debauched state of tobacco addiction affecting local Aboriginal people:

Our Sable brethren ...begged for... tobacco, retiring at night to their bush encampments where they sang away their dismal ditties to wile away the time. We gave some tobacco to a black who shortly afterwards returned complaining that a croppy (for they so termed the prisoners), had called him to take some biscuit and when he went to him snatched the tobacco out of his hand and kept it. (Gunson 1974, 44)

Tobacco addiction spread through Aboriginal society in many parts of the Hunter region affecting men, women and children. On 10 March 1825 Reverend Threlkeld watched two Aboriginal women approach him "naked and shivering", asking for tobacco, to which the missionary obliged and "they went away well pleased" (Gunson, 86). According to Reverend Threlkeld, it was a common sight to see Aboriginal People around Newcastle and Lake Macquarie enjoying the dubious virtues of tobacco smoking. In one horrific case, the missionary describes the effects of passive smoking where a baby suckled at its mother's breast is pacified by tobacco smoke. He writes on 3 June 1825:

A child crying took my attention, and to my surprise it was an infant at the breast screaming for a pipe of tobacco which the mother was smoking. It obtained the pipe but owing to its infancy was unable to convey it to its mouth. The mother aided it and the little infant actually whiffed it, the smoke coming out of its mouth and then as though exhausted by the effect of tobacco fell back on the breast and washed it down with its mother's milk. (Gunson 1974, 89)

Tobacco was being used as a means of engaging a variety of services from Aboriginal People. Cunningham states that he was able to enlist the services of an Aboriginal man named Ben with payments of tobacco in return for 'game' such as kangaroo (Cunningham 1966, 195). Likewise, Robert Dawson, the inaugural manager of the Australian Agricultural Company at Carrington on the western shores of Port Stephens supplied tobacco to Aboriginal People to acquire fresh food. He states that he "exchanged with them biscuits and tobacco for a luncheon of roasted oysters and a string of fish" (Dawson 1831, 314-318).

The records of Dawson (1831) reveal that he was able to acquire the services of Aboriginal People on a regular basis with tobacco payments. Dawson refers to the servitude provided by an Aboriginal man "who was sure to wait upon me when he was out of tobacco" (308). In fact, it appeared Dawson was such a prolific supplier of tobacco to Aboriginal People that his reputation precedes him during his travels: "After sending my name through their camp, where it appeared to be well known, I was applied to for tobacco" (274, 278). This infers that Aboriginal People at Port Stephens through word of mouth had not only become acquainted with the virtues and generosity of Dawson as a provider of tobacco, but also had developed a propensity toward tobacco.

Similar use of tobacco to elicit the services of Aboriginal People is also seen at Lake Macquarie and Newcastle. Reverend Threlkeld indicates that tobacco had become an integral component of life in Aboriginal societies in these parts of the Hunter region and was particularly useful in acquiring traditional language:

In order to obtain a knowledge of the language it was necessary to be amongst the natives as much as possible, the tent drew many who sat smoking their pipes around a charcoal fire answering such as I proposed, until the fumes of the fire, the everlasting stench of Tobacco, and the disagreeable smell of their own persons would compel me frequently to take refuge in the open air. (Gunson 1974, 46)

It took Reverend Threlkeld several years to complete his language study and it would appear that tobacco was a constant bartering tool for obtaining both language and services from Aboriginal People. As he navigated his way around the bays and creeks of Lake Macquarie collecting words from Aboriginal People, tobacco seems to be a critical part of his endeavour:

A boat became the most agreeable way of obtaining words for a vocabulary. And by supplying the Blacks with fish-hooks, tobacco, and other little articles I could secure a party at any time when the weather was favourable for fishing. (Gunson 1974, 46)

So tobacco was a useful commodity which colonists exchanged in return for Aboriginal knowledge and labour. It is also evident that tobacco had a pacifying affect on Aboriginal People according to Reverend Threlkeld who writes of the occupation of Aboriginal land in the 1820s:

Much has been said of our disposing the blacks or their land, but this did not inflame their minds against Europeans, generally speaking they were glad of Settlers residing amongst them, for the sake of obtaining bread, tea, sugar, rum, tobacco and clothing, which were procurable in exchange for game, going on messages for postage departments in the bush, and various other employments for which they were admirably adapted. (Gunson 1974, 57)

Dawson also found tobacco was useful as a means of negotiating with Aboriginal People during his early explorations around Port Stephens. On one occasion he was venturing into the upper reaches of the Myall River and unexpectedly encountered a large number of Aboriginal People. Dawson and his party were surrounded and, sensing hostility, he “threw several small pieces of tobacco amongst them, and called out, ‘I like black fellows always.’ The tobacco was instantly seized” (Dawson 1831, 309-313). Dawson was then approached by an Aboriginal man. He writes, “In a minute or two, a tall, fierce-looking fellow came up to me, and felt my coat pockets, and on discovering that there was more tobacco there, he pointed to it, as if he wished me to give him some” (309-310). Dawson agreed to this request, handed over more tobacco and in return was given roasted gigantic lilies and flying fox wings in exchange for this drug of dependency.

There is further evidence that colonists used tobacco to neutralise potential frontier conflict during colonial expansion in the Hunter region. According to William Telfer Junior, a colonial party with Aboriginal guides were herding sheep in the Barrington district when they were ambushed by a large number of Aboriginal men. Surrounded and without weapons, the overseer T Linford offered these Aboriginal men food and “two clay pipes and a fig of tobacco” (Telfer quoted in Millis 1980, 35). Telfer noted “this seemed to satisfy them” and the Aboriginal guides were told by the Aboriginal leaders of the ambush party that Linford’s peace offering of food, tobacco and implements had defused a hostile situation (ibid.). Telfer writes “they escaped through that man’s presence of mind in making them presents of tobacco and provisions” (ibid. 35-36). So it is evident that tobacco was a significant substance in transactions with Aboriginal People in the early contact period in the Barrington and Port Stephens districts.

Tobacco was even a prime subject in a law case in the Supreme Court of New South Wales where an Aboriginal man was charged with highway robbery. Legome, an Aboriginal man from the central coast, was charged with assaulting and demanding tobacco from a colonist called Patrick Sheridan. The colonial newspaper, *The Sydney Herald*, reported on 16 February 1835 that Legome had forcibly stolen Sheridan’s pipe and tobacco. As a result, Legome received a seven year sentence and was transported to Van Dieman’s Land for this crime. *The Sydney Herald* stated that on 18 January 1835 Sheridan was assaulted by a group of Aboriginal men:

Patrick Sheridan deposed that, on the day laid in the indictment, he was met by a party of blacks, amongst whom was the prisoner, who asked him for some tobacco, which he the prosecutor divided amongst them; after which, the prisoner, in a menacing attitude, poised his spear in the direction of the prosecutor and darted it forward, but the point went into the ground; prosecutor was exceedingly alarmed, expecting that he would be destroyed, as he had been informed that the blacks had been making enquiries for him a few days previously, and had committed many outrages in that neighbourhood. (*The Sydney Herald* 1835, 1)

The trend in tobacco use among Aboriginal people at Lake Macquarie continued into the 1830s and was probably a widespread addiction by this time. On 28 April 1836 Reverend Threlkeld reported to the London Missionary Society that the “blacks bring fish and oysters for which they receive flour and tobacco in return” (Gunson 1974, 127).

Remunerating Aboriginal people for their services with payments of tobacco continued into the 1840s in the Hunter region. According to the following two clergymen, money was rarely paid to Aboriginal

employees. Reverend William Ross, a minister of the Church of Scotland, was stationed at Paterson in the Upper Hunter Valley. From his response to a Select Committee Inquiry into the condition of Aboriginal people in the Hunter region, it is evident that remuneration was usually “flour and beef, tea, sugar, tobacco and articles of clothing” (Ross quoted in Replies to a Circular Letter, 1846). Reverend Robert Thorley Bolton, a minister of the Church of England stationed at Hexham near Newcastle, expressed similar sentiments. Bolton reiterated Ross’s comments when he replied to the inquiry on 15 April 1846 “For their labour, they seldom have more than broken victuals, flour, sugar, tea, and tobacco; sometimes they have old clothes given to them” (Replies to a Circular Letter, 1846).

James Backhouse, a member of the London Missionary Society, visited the Hunter region in 1843 and noted that Aboriginal people performed a variety of services in exchange for tobacco. He writes:

Our sable guides were joined on the way through the forest, by another of their tribe, whose name was Macquarie, and we saw several other parties, passing backward and forward. They sometimes amused themselves and us, by throwing their boomerangs, which made circuits, almost like the flight of birds. On reaching Newcastle, they received their wages in bread, tea, sugar, and tobacco. This kind of payment, they seemed to understand better than one in money; of which it has not been the policy of the settlers to teach them the value. (J. Backhouse 1843, 384)

In summing up the early colonial contact period between Europeans and Aboriginals in the Hunter region, it is worth noting the words of William Scott, a colonist born in Port Stephens in 1844. According to Scott, local Indigenous Australians at Port Stephens were strongly addicted to tobacco and used their culturally inherent ingenuity in wood craft to manufacture their own pipes. Scott recalled:

Tobacco was greatly prized by the men and women of the tribe...They smoked the fragment weed whenever they could get it, generally in pipes they made themselves. They were great mendicants where tobacco was concerned and would make veritable nuisances of themselves at times to obtain a small supply...With wheedling tones they would approach my father, and waving a cold and empty pipe, would exclaim in tragic tones: “Pipe very hungry, marsa”. (Bennett 1983, 42)

### **A similar pattern of tobacco smoking affecting Aboriginal People in other parts of colonial Australia**

It is further noted that the use of tobacco by colonists as a coercive agent to engage Aboriginal services was not limited to the Hunter region. Colonial expansionism continued in many parts of Australia during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and it would seem tobacco was an important means by which colonists engaged and remunerated Aboriginal People for their labour. Historian Gillian Cowlshaw (1989) pointed out that tobacco was a regular payment for Aboriginal labour in the pastoral industry in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (47). J. Jervis supports this claim stating “They make splendid shepherds, and there rations are not very expensive as they consist of 6 or 7 pounds of flour, 2 lbs of sugar, no tea and a fig of tobacco” (Quoted in Cowlshaw 1989, 48).

Historian Mary Anne Jebb in her historical study *Blood, Sweat and Welfare* (2003) pointed out that in the early contact period in the Kimberly region of Western Australia, tobacco was used by colonists to entice Aboriginal people to provide labour, food and a variety of menial services. Jebb states, “Tobacco, a powerful commodity strictly controlled by white men, was used in exchange for work and sex, and as a key tool in the maintenance and training of a station workforce” (122).

Henry Reynolds (1990) provides further support to the notion that tobacco was used by colonists to remunerate Aboriginal People for labour. Reynolds also gives an insight into why colonists may have used tobacco as a tool of coercion. He writes that tobacco was one of the few European goods that was attractive to Aboriginal people and from the colonist’s perspective, “The thing to do, it was thought, was to create a need for European commodities and then require the blacks to work in order to supply that need and so ‘feel the sweets of property’” (90, 91).

Richard Broome (1982) points out that the destruction of traditional lifestyle led to a “newfound boredom” and “many Aborigines developed a craving for tobacco” (54). According to Broome, a colonist in Victoria in the 1850s, “Edward Curr remarked that their leisure hours were ‘divided between putting the pipe to its legitimate purpose and begging my tobacco...give little tobacco, Mr Curr smallest...rang forever in my ear” (54-55).

Reynolds outlined in *Black pioneers: How Aboriginal and Islander People helped build Australia* how Indigenous Australians were exploited in numerous colonial enterprises, including pearling, mining, agricultural and pastoral industries (2000, 61-102). He writes “What was even more appealing to frontier squatters was that black labour was cheap. It was usually obtained in return for food, tobacco and clothing” (67).

T. Rowse (2002) explains in his historical study, *White flour, white power: From rations to citizenship in Central Australia*:

The process of colonisation of Australia meant that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people came into contact with tobacco through missionaries, miners, fishermen, anthropologists, and cattle station workers. Until they obtained Australian citizenship in 1967, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were confined in missions or worked on cattle stations and were given rations, including tobacco, in exchange for their labour. (quoted in Centre of Excellence in Tobacco Control 2010)

Broome (2010) importantly identifies the transition from traditional lifestyle to colonial employment as a key factor in tobacco abuse affecting the health of Aboriginal People. He states, “Aboriginal people in many regions traditionally enjoyed a narcotic from the *pitcheri* bush...Its use was strictly controlled by complex kinship and trading networks...However, Aboriginal use of European tobacco was not by tradition and not counterbalanced by traditional daily activities” (62). By the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Aboriginal People had become so conditioned to tobacco as a payment that when they bargained for increased remuneration for their labour, bonuses of tobacco were demanded (Reynolds 2000, 95). Clearly, tobacco has been an ongoing and subversive agent of race relations during colonisation.

Furthermore, with such a history it is little wonder that tobacco smoking is a major health hazard in many Aboriginal communities in contemporary times. According to the Minister for Indigenous Health, Rural and Regional Health and Regional Services Delivery, Warren Snowden, tobacco smoking currently contributes to 20% of Indigenous deaths in Australia. He states “Overall, around one in six Australians smoke; but the rate is almost one in two among Indigenous Australians. One in five deaths among Indigenous Australians is caused by smoking and that’s unacceptable” (Warren Snowden, 31 May 2010) Cardiovascular disease, diabetes, emphysema, cancer, hypertension and many other health problems have been directly linked to smoking (Department of Health, 2006) This national health study revealed:

Tobacco smoking was responsible for the greatest burden of disease and injury in Australia in 2003, followed by high blood pressure, high body mass, physical inactivity, and high blood cholesterol (Begg et al. 2007). Smoking tobacco increases the risk of numerous cancers, heart and vascular diseases, respiratory diseases and a variety of other conditions. It is responsible for around 20% of all cancer deaths, 80% of all lung cancer deaths, and 21% of all heart disease in Australia (DoHA 2006, 2006a). Tobacco use is of particular concern for the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, amongst whom smoking prevalence is more than double that of the non-Indigenous population. (DoHA 2006)

As shown in the history section of this article, Aboriginal People were remunerated for various services with tobacco, which hardly augured well for economic prosperity in Aboriginal society. It is argued that Aboriginal People were therefore placed in a position of relative socio economic disadvantage because they were remunerated with victuals such as tobacco rather than monetary payment. It is interesting to note that such socio economic inequity is still viewed as a contributing factor in substance abuse. The health study conducted in 2006 stated:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience disadvantage across a range of socioeconomic indicators including education, employment, income and housing (ABS & AIHW 2005). There is strong evidence from Australia and other developed countries that low

socioeconomic status is associated with poor health and increased exposure to health risk factors, including tobacco smoking (Blakely, Hales and Woodward 2004; Turrell & Mathers 2000). (DoHA 2006)

## Conclusion

This paper has explored a history of tobacco smoking affecting Aboriginal People primarily in the Hunter region during the early colonial period from 1800 to 1850. It is argued that tobacco smoking was a harmful factor introduced by European colonists into Aboriginal society in this part of Australia that had a major adverse impact on the health of these Indigenous Australians. Admittedly, it is hard to evaluate the severity of this impact, but nevertheless it is demonstrated that tobacco was widely distributed as a coercive agent by colonists to Aboriginal people in the Hunter region between 1800 and 1850.

To this end, tobacco being a highly addictive substance, proved an ideal aperitif to engage Aboriginal servitude. Most importantly, it is seen that tobacco was widely used by colonists to remunerate Aboriginal labour as colonists had done in the Hunter region. As usual, colonists maintained control over the supply of tobacco, thus leaving Aboriginal people reliant on the colonists' generosity to satisfy an addiction. Thus, tobacco provided a virulent means by which colonists could manipulate Aboriginal people through creation of a physical addiction and dependency. Most importantly it is argued that it is highly likely tobacco smoking had a negative impact on Indigenous health and potentially undermined Aboriginal health, rendering people susceptible to poor health and illness, especially respiratory and cardiovascular disease. It is strongly suggested that during the colonial period, widespread habitual tobacco smoking became grounded into many Aboriginal societies throughout Australia.

If tobacco smoking is viewed today by experts to contribute to 20% of Indigenous deaths in Australian society, then surely it is accepted that it was a significant factor in the early colonial contact period. The colonists controlled supply and used tobacco to manipulate Aboriginal men and women into positions of subservience. The craving was so strong that Aboriginal people were prepared to do menial tasks and even attack colonists to obtain tobacco. As has been demonstrated in this paper, tobacco abuse was widespread throughout the Hunter region and heavily consumed by colonists as well as Aboriginal people. As Cunningham pointed out, as much as 60,000 pounds of tobacco was being consumed annually in the colony of New South Wales. It is true that the colonists were not aware of the harmful effects of smoking compared to what is known today. Nevertheless, the literature demonstrates that the colonists were fully aware of the addictive properties of tobacco and skilfully manipulated its use to negotiate and exploit the labour of many Aboriginal People in the Hunter region, and indeed many parts of colonial Australia.

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