

Tuberculosis notifications in Australia, 1995

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Abstract

This is the fifth annual report of the National Mycobacterial Surveillance System (NMSS), for new and relapsed cases of tuberculosis notified to State and Territory health authorities in 1995. Cases of atypical mycobacterial infection notified to the scheme are also briefly summarised. The notification rate for new cases of tuberculosis was 5.47 per 100,000 population, and for relapsed cases 0.28 per 100,000. These rates have remained stable for a number of years in Australia, and are low compared with rates in other countries. Some identifiable groups in the Australian community continue to experience higher rates of tuberculosis, including members of indigenous communities and some groups born overseas. Surveillance through the NMSS has a major role to play in the control of tuberculosis. *Comm Dis Intell* 1997;21:261-269.

Introduction

Tuberculosis and other mycobacterial infections are a major public health concern in both developing and developed countries¹⁻⁴. The incidence of new infections has risen over recent years in several developed countries for various reasons including: immigration from high incidence countries, reductions in health services and the increased prevalence of HIV infection. High rates of new disease are seen in many countries in the Australian region. In Australia, as in other developed countries, an increased risk is recognised in several identifiable sub-populations, including: homeless persons of all ages,

elderly men living alone, prison populations, HIV-positive persons, members of indigenous populations, refugees and members of some migrant groups⁵⁻⁹. The risk of nosocomial transmission is another concern¹⁰. Although the increasing multi-drug resistance observed in some other countries, has not yet occurred in Australia¹¹⁻¹⁵, it remains a potential problem for effective tuberculosis control.

The National Mycobacterial Surveillance System (NMSS) was instituted in 1991 under the auspices of the Communicable Diseases Network Australia New Zealand (CDNANZ). Its role was to enhance the previously existing mechanisms

of national surveillance of tuberculosis and other mycobacterial diseases, with the aim of providing more comprehensive data to facilitate prevention and control measures. This report is the fifth from this system, comprising analysis of notifications for the calendar year 1995. Previous reports have been published for the years 1991 to 1994¹⁶⁻¹⁹.

Prior to the institution of the NMSS in its present form, tabulations of national data were prepared for many years up to 1985²⁰. These tabulations comprised collated data on tuberculosis notifications from the States and Territories, and included information on many of the data items currently

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Table 1. Notifications of new and relapsed cases of tuberculosis, and rates per 100,000 population, Australia, 1986 to 1995, by year

Year	New Cases		Relapsed cases		Total Cases	
	Number	Rate	Number	Rate	Number	Rate
1986	863	5.39	43	0.27	906	5.66
1987	868	5.34	39	0.24	907	5.58
1988	925	5.60	29	0.18	954	5.77
1989	902	5.36	50	0.30	952	5.66
1990	979	5.74	37	0.22	1016	5.95
1991	903	5.22	47	0.27	950	5.50
1992	983	5.62	28	0.16	1011	5.78
1993	944	5.35	47	0.27	991	5.61
1994 ¹	996	5.58	61	0.34	1057	5.93
1995	988	5.47	50	0.28	1038	5.75

1. The number and rate of notifications of new and relapsed cases was previously reported incorrectly¹⁹.

Table 2. Notifications of new and relapsed cases of tuberculosis and rates per 100,000 population, Australia, 1995, by State and Territory

	New Cases		Relapsed cases		Total Cases	
	Number	Rate	Number	Rate	Number	Rate
Australian Capital Territory	8	2.63	0	-	8	2.63
New South Wales	406	6.64	33	0.54	439	7.18
Northern Territory	39	22.43	0	-	39	22.43
Queensland	115	3.51	10	0.31	125	3.81
South Australia	52	3.53	1	0.07	53	3.60
Tasmania	12	2.54	0	-	12	2.54
Victoria	281	6.24	5	0.11	286	6.35
Western Australia	75	4.33	1	0.06	76	4.39
Total	988	5.47	50	0.28	1038	5.75

collected and analysed in the NMSS.

Three reports published in 1991 and 1992²¹⁻²³ provided a brief analyses of national data on tuberculosis notifications for the period 1986 to 1990.

Methods

Data were collected by health authorities in each of the States and Territories, de-identified, and provided to the NMSS in computerised format for national collation and analysis. The data set included the following core fields in common with the National Notifiable Diseases Surveillance System (NNDSS):²⁴ unique identifier for each notification, disease code, postcode of residence, sex of the person, dates of onset and report, indigenous status, and confirmation status of the report. It also included the following supplementary data: date of birth, ethnicity, country of birth, length of residence in Australia for overseas-born persons, species of the pathogen, principal site of the disease,

methods of diagnosis (culture techniques, microscopy, tissue specimen histology, tuberculin skin testing, radiological techniques and clinical examination), antimicrobials used at the time of notification, BCG status, HIV status and relapse status (new diagnosis or relapse).

The definitions used were the same as those used since 1986²¹:

1. Tuberculosis (new case)

- a case which has been confirmed by the identification of *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* (or *M. africanum* or *M. bovis*) by culture or microscopy; or
- a case which has been diagnosed to be active clinically and which has been accepted as such by the State or Territory Director of Tuberculosis.

2. Tuberculosis (relapse)

- a case of active tuberculosis diagnosed again (bacteriologically, radiologically or clinically) following previous full treatment (as deemed appropriate by the State or Territory Director of Tuberculosis) and

considered to be inactive or quiescent.

3. Atypical mycobacterial infection

- clinical features consistent with one or more of the following;
 - presence of a compatible disease process which is clinically, radiologically and/or pathologically not due to other causes,
 - consistent repeated recovery of the same organism from the same site in moderate to abundant amounts,
 - recovery of atypical mycobacteria from sites which are normally sterile.

Mortality data for tuberculosis, and denominator population data for the calculation of rates, were obtained from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS)²⁵⁻²⁷. Denominator data were estimates of relevant population sizes as at 30 June, 1995. The classification and grouping of countries was according to the ABS standard

Table 3. Notifications of new cases of tuberculosis and rates per 100,000 population, Australia 1995, by age group and sex

Age group (years)	Males		Females		Persons ¹	
	Number	Rate	Number	Rate	Number	Rate
0-4	17	2.57	10	1.59	28	2.17
5-9	6	0.91	10	1.60	16	1.24
10-14	6	0.91	6	0.95	12	0.93
15-19	23	3.53	26	4.21	50	3.94
20-24	36	4.89	55	7.76	92	6.36
25-29	48	6.92	42	6.11	91	6.59
30-34	49	6.73	57	7.80	106	7.27
35-39	37	5.23	48	6.77	85	6.00
40-44	32	4.84	36	5.42	68	5.13
45-49	31	4.86	22	3.55	53	4.22
50-54	24	4.83	27	5.67	52	5.35
55-59	32	7.82	24	6.06	56	6.95
60-64	28	8.03	12	3.41	40	5.71
65-69	31	9.21	24	6.75	56	8.09
70-74	47	17.42	23	7.14	72	12.16
75-79	30	17.58	22	9.33	53	13.04
80-84	21	20.49	13	7.58	34	12.40
85 +	11	19.40	13	9.75	24	12.63
Total	509	5.66	470	5.19	988	5.47

1. The sex of 9 persons was not reported

classification of countries for social statistics²⁸.

Results

Notification rates

In 1995, 988 notifications of new cases of tuberculosis were received by the NMSS, and 50 cases of relapse, making a total of 1038 cases (Table 1). The corresponding annual rates of 5.47 per 100,000 persons for new cases, 0.28 per 100,000 for relapses and 5.75 per 100,000 for total cases, are similar to rates seen in recent years. The rates

have remained low in Australia since the mid-1980s (Figure 1). Rates of notification of both new and relapsed cases varied considerably between States and Territories (Table 2). The rates of notification of new cases varied from a high of 22.43 per 100,000 reported by the Northern Territory, to a low of 2.54 per 100,000 in Tasmania. The most populous States (New South Wales and Victoria) reported intermediate rates of new disease.

Age and Sex

There were 509 notifications of new disease for males and 470 for females, with a male:female ratio of 1.08:1. The crude annual incidence rates were 5.66 and 5.19 per 100,000 for males and females respectively (Table 3). In nine cases, the sex of the person was not reported.

Age-specific rates for both males and females were highest in the elderly (Table 3), the rates for older males being generally at least twice the rates for females in the same age group. There was also a slight peak in rates

Figure 1. Notifications and deaths, per 100,000 population, Australia, 1968 to 1995, by year

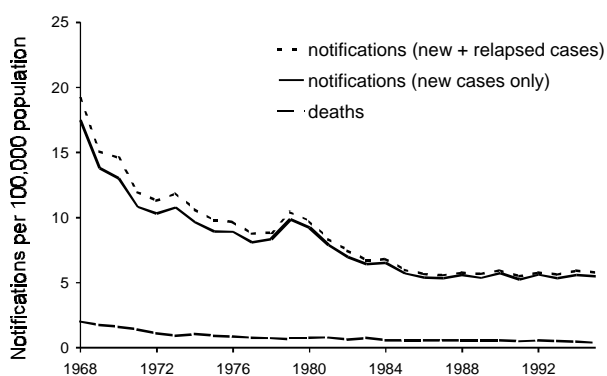


Figure 2. Notifications of new tuberculosis cases in overseas and Australian born, per 100,000 population, Australia, 1986 to 1995

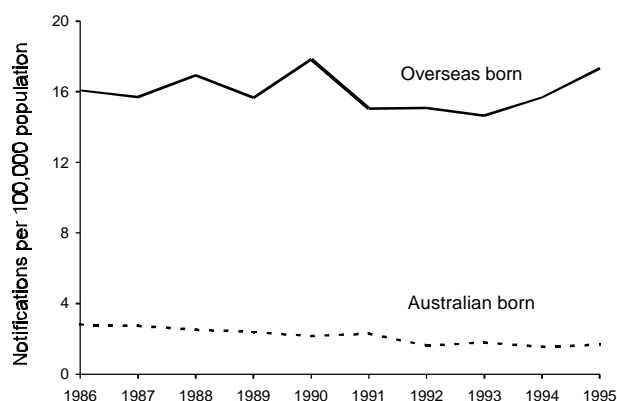


Table 4. Notifications of new cases of tuberculosis, Australia 1995, by reported principal site and sex

Site	Males	Per cent	Females	Per cent	Total	Per cent
Pulmonary	344	67.6	248	52.8	600 ¹	60.7
Pleural	23	4.5	17	3.6	40	4.0
Lymphatic	54	10.6	108	23.0	163 ²	16.5
Bone and joint	11	2.2	22	4.7	33	3.3
Genito-urinary	22	4.3	18	3.8	40	4.0
Miliary	5	1.0	5	1.1	10	1.0
Meningeal and CNS	7	1.4	5	1.1	12	1.2
Peritoneal	11	2.2	13	2.8	24	2.4
Other sites ³	13	2.6	12	2.6	25	2.5
Not stated	19	3.7	22	4.7	41	4.1
Total	509	-	470	-	988	-

1. In 8 cases, the sex of the person was not reported.

2. In 1 case, the sex of the person was not reported.

3. "Other" principal sites included larynx (5 cases), pericardium (5), specified abdominal organs (3) and soft tissues (3 cases); in 9 cases, "other" site was not further defined.

Table 5. Notifications of new cases of tuberculosis, 1995, by diagnostic techniques

Diagnostic technique	Positive result recorded ¹	Per cent of total cases
Culture of specimen	630	63.8
Microscopic examination	358	36.2
Histological examination	156	15.8
Tuberculin skin testing	375	38.0
Radiological examination	329	33.3
Clinical examination	296	30.0
No information available	52	5.3
Total	988	100.0

1. A positive result was often recorded for more than one diagnostic technique.

for both sexes in the early 30s. This pattern is similar to those observed over the last few years.

The number of new cases notified in 1995 in children less than 5 years of age (28) was higher than for any year since 1991, when 37 cases were recorded. Notifications in the age groups 5 - 9 years and 10 - 14 years (16 and 12 respectively) were also higher than the numbers for 1993 and 1994. They were however, similar to those for 1992, and lower than the 1991 total for this age range (33)¹⁶⁻¹⁹.

Principal sites of disease

A principal site of disease was reported for 947 (96%) notifications of new cases of disease. Of these, 600 (61%) reported the principal site as pulmonary, and 163 (17%) as lymphatic (Table 4). As has been reported in previous years, pulmonary disease was more commonly reported for males, and lymphatic disease was more common in females. Pleural and

genito-urinary disease were also commonly reported.

In children under ten years of age the principal site of disease was pulmonary in 57% of cases and lymphatic in 14% of cases. For adolescents (10 - 19 years old) the proportions were 53% and 23% respectively.

Methods of diagnosis

Ninety-five per cent of notifications of new cases of tuberculosis included information on the methods of diagnosis. Overall, 630 cases were reported as culture-confirmed (63.8% of total notifications), including 411 (68.5%) of the 600 cases of pulmonary disease.

Microscopy, histology, tuberculin skin tests, radiological and clinical examination were also reported as methods of diagnosis (Table 5). In cases without culture confirmation, microscopy was positive in 68, and histology in a further 81. In cases lacking positive culture, microscopy o

histology, tuberculin skin testing was reported positive in 110, with radiological or clinical signs reported in 90 of these. Radiological and/or clinical signs alone were reported for 47 cases.

Pathogen

The species of organism was reported for 889 notifications of new disease (90% of the total). This was considerably higher than the proportion reported for previous years. *M. tuberculosis* was reported for 884 cases (99.4%), *M. bovis* for 4 cases (0.4%) and *M. africanum* for 1 case (0.1%).

Use of Antimicrobial Drugs

The antimicrobial drugs used in initial treatment following diagnosis were reported for 877 (88%) of the 988 cases of new disease (Table 6). Treatment was initiated with four or more anti-tuberculosis drugs in 667 (76%) of these 877 cases. The most commonly recorded initial combination, used in 653 (74%) of the cases for which data were available, was the four-drug regimen of isoniazid + rifampicin + ethambutol + pyrazinamide. In 9 cases, the four drugs were used in combination with one or more other antimicrobial drugs. In two cases the initial combination included 7 drugs. The additional drugs used included one or more of the following: streptomycin, prothionamide, cycloserine, capreomycin, ciprofloxacin, clarithromycin and amikacin.

The use of three-drug combinations was reported in 175 (20%) of those for whom data was recorded. The

Table 6. Notifications of new cases of tuberculosis, Australia 1995, by initial drug regimen

Drug combination	Number	Per cent of reported cases
Isoniazid + rifampicin + pyrazinamide + ethambutol + other drugs	8	0.9
Other combinations of 5 or more drugs	2	0.2
Isoniazid + rifampicin + pyrazinamide + ethambutol	653	74.5
Isoniazid + rifampicin + pyrazinamide + another drug	2	0.2
Isoniazid + rifampicin + ethambutol + another drug	2	0.2
Isoniazid + rifampicin + pyrazinamide	142	16.2
Isoniazid + rifampicin + ethambutol	26	3.0
Isoniazid + rifampicin + streptomycin	2	0.2
Other 3 drug combinations	5	0.6
Isoniazid + rifampicin	16	1.8
Other 2 drug combinations	2	0.2
Isoniazid	4	0.5
Ethambutol	1	0.1
Nil treatment	12	1.4
Not reported	111	-
Total	988	-

common three-drug combinations were: isoniazid + rifampicin + ethambutol, used in 26 cases (3%), and isoniazid + rifampicin + pyrazinamide, used in 142 cases (16%). In 2 cases, isoniazid + rifampicin + streptomycin was used.

Two-drug combinations were recorded at initiation of treatment in 18 cases: isoniazid + rifampicin in 16 cases, and ethambutol + rifampicin and ethambutol + streptomycin in 1 case each. Two cases were recorded as having single drug therapy, one with isoniazid and the other with ethambutol.

Pyridoxine (Vitamin B6) was mentioned as standard adjuvant therapy in the Northern Territory. The use of corticosteroids was reported in a few cases.

In 12 cases it was reported that no antimicrobial treatment had been used, for reasons including emigration, terminal status and post-mortem diagnosis.

For the 425 cases of reported culture-positive pulmonary tuberculosis, initial drug treatment was recorded in 388 (91%). Of these, 318 (82%) received four or more drugs, 59 (15%) received three drugs and 7 (2%) two drugs. One person received isoniazid alone and three persons were reported to have received no treatment.

BCG status

BCG status was reported for 417 (42%) of notifications of new cases of tuberculosis. Of these, 219 (53%)

persons were reported to have received BCG vaccination.

HIV status

Of the 988 notifications of new cases of tuberculosis, HIV status was reported for 82 (8.3%) cases, of whom 6 were reported to be HIV-positive. Five of these were males aged 29 - 59 years, and one was a 4 year old child. Five, including the child, were reported to have pulmonary disease, and one meningial disease.

In view of the significant under-reporting of HIV status, these data provide inadequate information on which to base inferences regarding the extent of tuberculosis-HIV co-infection.

Country of birth

Information on country of birth was included in 948 (96%) of the 988 notifications of new cases of disease (Table 7). Of these, 233 (24.6%) were reported as Australian-born, corresponding to an annual crude incidence rate of 1.67 per 100,000 persons. This rate is similar to those reported for the last five years.

The remaining 715 cases (75.4%) were reported as having been born overseas; a specific country of birth was reported for 712 of these. The annual crude incidence rate for non-Australian born persons was 17.34 per 100,000. This is slightly higher than the rates reported for the years 1992 - 1994¹⁷⁻¹⁹ but is similar to the rate of 17.99 per 100,000 recorded in 1990²² (Figure 2). However, caution should be exercised in interpreting these rates, as birthplace data was missing in 13% of

cases reported for the years 1992 - 1994.

The highest numbers of notifications for countries of birth other than Australia were received for persons born in Vietnam (167), China (62), the Philippines (61), India (56) and Indonesia (45).

The highest rates in overseas-born persons (greater than 100 per 100,000) were for persons born in Vietnam and Indonesia (Table 7). Rates greater than 50 per 100,000 per annum were observed for persons born in India, China, the Philippines, Korea, Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos (note that for some of these, the rates were based on small numbers of cases, and require caution in interpretation).

The notification rate for 1995 for Vietnamese-born persons is slightly higher than the rate recorded for 1994 and 1993 (98.6 and 94.0 per 100,000 persons respectively), but is lower than the rate for 1992 (122.6 per 100,000 persons).

The age distribution of cases in the overseas-born is markedly different from the distribution in the Australian-born. More than half of the Australian born cases were over 55 years of age (Figure 3). In the overseas-born, more than half were younger than 40 years old. This may be partly explained by differences in the age distribution of the two populations. However, in the overseas-born, the age group distribution revealed three separate peaks: in the very young, in young adults, and in the very elderly (Figure 4). For overseas-born females, the

Table 7. Notifications of new cases of tuberculosis, Australia 1995, number and estimated rates per 100,000 population, by reported country and region¹ of birth.

Country / Region	Number	Rate	Median Age (years)	Population (100,000s)
Australia	233	1.67	56	139.32
New Zealand	13	4.5	48	2.90
Papua New Guinea	13	46.9	24	0.28
Oceania (other)	16	-	-	na
Oceania (total)	42	11.1	-	3.79
United Kingdom / Northern Ireland	21	1.7	67	12.11
Greece	9	6.2	52	1.45
Italy	11	4.2	70	2.61
Yugoslavia (former)	22	12.2	50	1.80
Germany	9	7.6	66	1.19
Poland	7	10.4	72	0.67
Former USSR	7	14.6	53	0.48
Europe (other)	12	-	-	na
Europe (total)	98	4.1	-	23.74
Lebanon	7	8.5	40	0.82
Turkey	4	12.1	41	0.33
Middle East / north Africa (other)	9	-	-	na
Middle East / north Africa (total)	20	9.3	-	2.14
Cambodia	12	55.0	38	0.22
Indonesia (includes East Timor)	45	107.1	36	0.42
Laos	6	54.9	26	0.11
Malaysia	13	14.2	45	0.92
Myanmar (Burma)	7	70.5	44	0.10
Philippines	61	66.4	40	0.92
Singapore	5	13.8	46	0.36
Thailand	11	65.4	36	0.17
Vietnam	167	113.9	33	1.47
South East Asia (total)	327	69.9	-	4.68
China	62	66.9	39	0.93
Hong Kong	22	24.1	42	0.91
Republic of Korea	20	81.2	27	0.25
Taiwan	5	-	23	na
North East Asia (total)	109	42.9	-	2.54
Bangladesh	5	-	52	na
India	56	70.9	32	0.79
Pakistan	7	-	29	na
Sri Lanka	13	27.8	52	0.47
South Asia (other)	5	-	-	na
South Asia (total)	86	59.7	-	1.44
North America (total)	1	1.1	-	0.87
Chile	4	14.5	47	0.28
Peru	3	-	39	na
South / Central America (other)	3	-	-	na
South / Central America (total)	10	11.8	-	0.85
Eritrea	3	-	55	na
Ethiopia	5	-	23	na
Somalia	7	-	26	na
Africa excluding north Africa (other)	4	-	-	na
Africa excluding north Africa (total)	19	16.28	-	1.17
Overseas (not further defined)	3	-	-	na
Overseas (total)	715	17.34	38	41.22
Not stated	40	-	-	na
Total	988	5.47	40	180.54

1. "Regions" are as defined in the Australian Standard Classification of Countries for Social Statistics.

na = Population data are not available for Australian residents born in these countries.

Table 8. Notifications of new cases of tuberculosis, Australia, 1995: overseas born persons, by region¹ of birthplace and duration of residence

Duration of residence			Middle East	South East	North East	Southern	North/South	Africa	Total
	Oceania	Europe	& north Africa	Asia	Asia	Asia	& Central America	excluding north Africa	Overseas born ²
1 year	13	2	3	22	10	10	0	3	63
1 - 2 years	3	4	3	41	12	6	0	2	71
2 - 3 years	2	0	1	23	9	5	0	2	42
3 - 5 years	2	2	2	40	17	12	1	0	76
5 - 10 years	8	5	3	59	30	16	3	3	127
10 - 20 years	4	6	4	79	14	11	1	1	120
20 - 40 years	3	35	2	7	2	5	1	1	56
40 + years	1	21	1	5	2	0	0	0	30
Not stated	6	23	1	51	13	21	5	7	127
Total	42	98	20	327	109	86	11	19	712

1. "Regions" are as defined by the Australian Standard Classification of Countries for Social Statistics.
2. In 3 cases, the birth-place of persons notified as overseas-born was not further described.

peaks in the age groups 0 - 4 years and 20 - 24 years were most pronounced. For males the highest peaks were in the age groups 0 - 4 years and 75 - 79 years.

The length of time that overseas-born persons had been resident in Australia was reported for 585 notifications (82% of those reported as born overseas). Reported duration of residence ranged from less than one year to 74 years (Table 8), with a median duration of residence of 6 years. In 252 cases (43%), notification of new disease had been made within 5 years of arrival. Length of residence of less than 5 years was common for persons born in Asian regions. Periods of residence greater than 20 years were recorded for the majority of persons born in European countries. Persons from countries in the Oceania region tended

to have been resident in Australia for periods between these extremes.

Indigenous persons

Indigenous status was reported for all of the 233 new cases of tuberculosis in Australian-born persons; 52 (22%) of these were reported as being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander persons. Based on an estimate of the mid-1995 population of indigenous persons, this corresponds to an annual crude rate of 15.5 per 100,000 persons. The rate is approximately three times the rate for Australia as a whole, and almost 12 times the rate of 1.33 per 100,000 for non-indigenous Australian-born persons. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons included 26 females in the age range from 5 years to 81 years (median 33 years), and 26 males in the age range 5 to 78 years (median 37 years).

Pulmonary disease was reported for 18 females and 22 males. Several other primary sites of infection were reported, including miliary disease in a teenage male and an elderly female. Three males (aged in their 40s, 50s and 80s respectively) with relapsed pulmonary disease were reported.

Relapsed Cases

Fifty cases of tuberculosis specified as relapsed were notified (Table 2). These comprised 4.8% of total notifications and represented a notification rate of 0.28 per 100,000 persons, which is comparable with rates reported over the last 10 years.

Of the 50 relapsed cases, 19 were females (18 - 77 years; median 51 years) and 31 were males (24 - 86 years; median 61 years). In 36 (72%) of these 50 cases, the person was

Figure 3. Notifications of new cases of tuberculosis in Australian born persons, per 100,000 population, Australia, 1995, by age group and sex

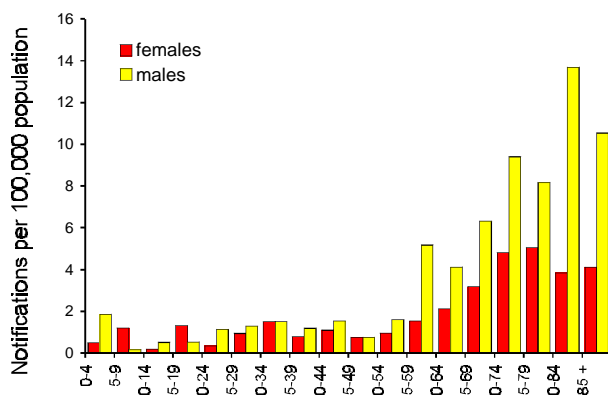
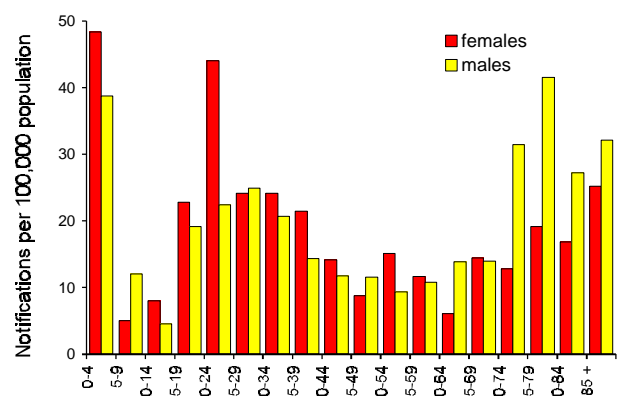


Figure 4. Notifications of new cases of tuberculosis in overseas born persons, per 100,000 population, Australia, 1995, by age group and sex



reported to have been born overseas. No country was extensively represented. The period of residence of overseas-born persons was less than 1 year in 4 cases. In 12 cases the person had been resident in Australia for between 1 and 10 years, and in 13 cases for more than 10 years. In 7 cases the period of residence was not reported.

The primary site of disease was reported for 49 of the 50 cases; 36 had pulmonary disease, 9 lymphatic disease, 3 had bone/joint disease and 1 genito-urinary disease. HIV status was reported for 13 cases, and was negative in all of these.

Almost all of the relapsed cases were reported from 3 jurisdictions. Of the 33 cases notified in New South Wales, 23 were pulmonary (13 culture positive) and 6 lymphatic (3 culture positive). The Queensland cases comprised 7 cases of pulmonary disease (3 culture positive) and 3 lymphatic disease (2 culture positive). Of the 5 cases notified from Victoria, 4 were pulmonary (1 of which was culture positive).

Mortality

The NMSS database currently provides very limited information on mortality in notified cases; for 1995, this information was recorded in only 2 cases.

During 1995, the Australian Bureau of Statistics recorded 28 deaths, for which the cause was reported as tuberculosis of a specified site, and a further 43 deaths ascribed to late effects of tuberculosis; a total of 71 deaths in which the primary underlying cause of death was tuberculosis²⁵. This corresponds to an annual death rate of 0.39 per 100,000 persons (Figure 1). Forty-three deaths were males; 13 due to pulmonary disease, 1 each to central nervous system, intestinal and genito-urinary disease, 3 to miliary tuberculosis, and 24 to late effects of tuberculosis. The 28 deaths in females comprised 9 from pulmonary disease and 19 from late effects.

Atypical mycobacterial infection

Data on notifications of cases of atypical mycobacterial infection were received from seven States and Territories. There was a total of 696 reports. HIV status was reported for 90 cases (13%) of whom 84 (93%) were reported to be HIV-positive.

Organisms identified included *M. avium-intracellulare* (491 notifications), *M. fortuitum-chelonae* (53), *M. gordonae* (32), *M. scrofulaceum* (12), *M. terrae* (35), *M. marinum* (13), *M. kansasii* (7), *M. flavescens* (4), *M. xenopi*(5), *M. gastrii* (1), *M. simiae* (1), *M. ulcerans* (2), *M. abscessii* (4), *M. haemophilum* (1), and unknown/not reported (18 cases).

Of the 84 HIV-positive cases, 79 were males in the 23 - 69 years age range (median 37 years) and one was a male infant under 1 year old. The 4 females were aged 4, 38, 46 and 66 years. Reported infections included pulmonary disease (12 cases), pleural disease (9), septicaemia (11) and disseminated infection (32 cases).

Discussion

The results of data analysis from the NMSS should be interpreted in conjunction with reports derived from analysis of other Australian data. These include the Australian Mycobacterium Reference Laboratory Network^{14, 31}, and the NNDSS²⁴.

The level of reporting to the NMSS is uncertain; however, the number of notifications reported to this system for 1995 is consistent with data available from the other sources^{24, 31}.

Compared with the data received for the years 1993 and 1994, the information in the 1995 database was considerably more complete, particularly for the following fields: country of birth, period of residence (for the overseas-born), indigenous status, primary site of disease, and antimicrobials used in initial treatment.

The six data fields for methods of diagnosis were also considerably more complete. However, these data continue to be subject to difficulties in the variety of recording formats used, and in the ambiguity of their interpretation. BCG status and HIV status continued to be inadequately documented.

Notification rates of new cases of tuberculosis have remained stable in Australia for several years, and remain equal to the lowest rates recorded for any country in the world⁴. However, some groups in the Australian community are disproportionately affected. These include indigenous persons and several migrant groups. The high notification rate in the Northern Territory (Table 2) reflects notifications of cases in Aboriginal or

Torres Strait Islander persons (62% of notifications), and persons born overseas (38% of notifications).

Rates of reported disease in some overseas-born groups are many times the rates in the Australian-born. This reflects the high rates of primary infection experienced by persons growing up in these countries.

The rate of notified new disease in Australian-born persons has declined over the last 10 years, from 2.8 cases per 100,000 in 1986 to 1.7 per 100,000 in 1995. In contrast, the rate in overseas-born persons has risen slightly during this period.

The maintenance of very low rates of new disease in Australian-born persons, in spite of continuing migration from countries of high incidence, suggests that no significant transmission of disease is occurring from migrants to the Australian-born. A survey of Australian-born and overseas-born children from 24 Sydney schools also supports this view^{29, 30}.

Allowing for missing data, the high proportion of cases in which a four-drug regimen was used to initiate treatment is notable. In the absence of individual clinical data and information on subsequent changes to the regimen, the total length of treatment and whether cure was achieved, it is not possible to comment further on the overall adequacy of the recorded treatment regimens.

The notification rate for new cases of tuberculosis in Australia (an average of less than 5.5 per 100,000 per annum over the last 10 years) compares very favourably with rates in other countries (for example, the reported rates for 1994 of 5.6 per 100,000 in Norway, 6.1 in Sweden, 10.7 in the United Kingdom, 7.0 in Canada, 9.3 in the United States of America and 10.0 in New Zealand⁴). The continuing low rate of mortality from the disease also compares favourably. These achievements, together with the low rates of multi-drug resistant organisms in Australia^{14, 15, 31} can be attributed to the quality of public health services in their management and control of tuberculosis.

However, in view of the global nature of tuberculosis and the presence within the population of groups with high rates of disease, Australia must continue to maintain and develop its tuberculosis control activities.

Good surveillance is essential for good disease control. This report has highlighted some areas within the existing database where better data collection is needed. However, there is also a need to expand the database to allow for better outcome surveillance. This has been recommended in the Draft Report of the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) Tuberculosis Working Party, which was released for public comment in 1996. The Final Report is to be published later this year. Improvements in surveillance procedures can be expected as a result of implementation of its recommendations.

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Correction:

In the report of the NMSS for the year 1994¹⁹, the number of relapsed cases was incorrectly reported (for Victoria, and for the total) in Tables 1 and 2, and in the text. The number has been corrected in Table 1 of this report.

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