

# Gisborne Doctors Promote Asthma Control

Friday, 12 December 2003, 10:33 am  
Press Release: Tairāwhiti District Health

New research by Tairāwhiti District Health (TDH) doctors indicates asthmatics could benefit significantly from a breathing technique named after a Russian medical pioneer. The results of a Gisborne trial have been published by the New Zealand Medical Journal this month.

**“Marked reductions in the use of preventative and reliever asthma inhalers, suggests that the Buteyko Breathing Technique warrants further study,”** says one of the four authors, Gisborne Hospital Emergency Department Clinical Director Dr Patrick McHugh. “As a result we want to make the technique more accessible to people with asthma in Tairāwhiti.” The Buteyko Breathing Technique trains people with asthma to slow their breathing, thereby reducing the hyperventilation associated with asthma.

**Dr McHugh became interested in Buteyko having seen patients’ health improve after using the technique. He also noticed a corresponding drop in their need for medication.**

**Dr Bruce Duncan, formerly TDH’s Medical Director and now the organisation’s Planning and Funding Manager, says no medications are without side effects, so it is always beneficial to look for alternatives to prescribed medicine.**

**“If you are able to reduce your intake of medication and maintain or increase control over your condition, then non-prescribed therapy must be a consideration.”**

**“Reducing your medication where possible also means there is an increased reserve of medication available to the patient if and when required.”**

Dr Duncan said the Buteyko Breathing Technique costs less than prolonged use of medication and provides the patient with another option to best manage their asthma.

**Dr McHugh said he was surprised the Buteyko Breathing Technique hadn’t been previously investigated in New Zealand, given that the country has such a high incidence of asthma.**

**National figures estimate that one in six New Zealanders live with asthma. Based on this figure, around 7000 people in the Tairāwhiti region could have the condition.**

**“There appears to be no other research on this in New Zealand, and only a limited amount of study done in Australia.”**

Drs McHugh and Duncan joined with TDH Consultant Physician Fergus Aitcheson and former Public Health Unit Health Geographer Frank Houghton (now living in Ireland), to study the benefits of Buteyko Breathing Technique.

In 2000 the doctors carried out a blinded randomised controlled trial comparing the Buteyko Breathing Technique with a control group. The trial conducted in Gisborne saw 38 people with asthma aged between 18 and 70 split into two groups. One group learned the Buteyko Breathing Technique and the other group studied conventional asthma education and relaxation techniques. The trial had been approved by the Tairāwhiti Regional Ethics Committee and lasted six months. It was funded by grants from the White Cross Group and the Tairāwhiti Therapeutics and Arts Trust.

**Trial results showed that the Buteyko group reduced their use of inhaled steroids by 50 per cent, and reliever medication by 85 per cent.**

Dr Aitcheson says the results are encouraging.

“Whilst this is a small study in a highly selected group it showed that the Buteyko Breathing Technique can provide sustained symptomatic relief greatly reducing the need for drugs.” “It offers a safe and effective evidence-based choice on how to manage the condition.” Dr Aitcheson says the doctors will soon present their findings to Tairāwhiti District Health Board in an effort to encourage greater research into this form of therapy.

“With a standard course in the Buteyko Breathing Technique costing about \$500 we need to look at how to make it more accessible to the people of Tairāwhiti.”