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The final publication is available at Springer via http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s12529-016-9586-3

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Samoan Smokers Talk about Smoking and Quitting

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Introduction: Samoa, like other Pacific Island countries, faces a persistent challenge to reduce tobacco use among its citizens. As a signatory to the WHO FCTC, Samoa is obligated to introduce measures to reduce tobacco use and is currently trailing a text message smoking cessation programme (mCessation) to achieve this outcome. Tobacco remains relatively cheap and is widely available in Samoa, but little is known about how smoking is initiated or why and how people quit tobacco. This study offers an insight into tobacco use as a behaviour and as cultural practice perceived by smokers and non-smokers in Samoa.

Methods: Six focus groups with smokers and non-smokers were conducted in Apia, Samoa. Groups were homogenous according to age, gender and smoking status. Focus groups were conducted in Samoan and later transcribed for analysis.

Results: Tobacco use is initiated most commonly in late teens and early twenties and most frequently in social contexts. Maintenance of tobacco use reflects a widely held perception of the tangible benefits, including aiding feelings of strength and energy, relief from indigestion and as a means to accelerate the effects of alcohol. Tobacco use was deeply connected to social life in Samoa among friends and for some, with family. Drivers to quit originate out of concern regarding health effects and (secondly) costs.

Conclusions: Tobacco use is well entrenched in Samoan society; efforts to reduce tobacco use need to be based on implicit understanding of fa’a Samoa to reverse the trajectory of tobacco use and associated non-communicable disease.

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Word count: 249