STRENGTHENING THE FUTURE HEALTH OF THE LATROBE VALLEY

The government response to the review of the Hazelwood Long Term Health Study
The Long Term Health Study is a comprehensive, 20 year project to understand the potential long term health effects of exposure to smoke and fire so that in the future we can prevent or reduce adverse health effects in similar situations. Importantly, the study must also inform ongoing work to improve the health of the Latrobe Valley community.

The goal of the Long-Term Health Study is to better predict any potential long term health effects of exposure to smoke and fire so that in the future we can prevent or reduce adverse health effects in similar situations. Importantly, the study must also inform ongoing work to improve the health of the Latrobe Valley community.

One of these recommendations called for an independent review of the Long Term Health Study to make sure the study is designed to achieve its goal and provide greater community engagement.

The independent review was undertaken by Deloitte Access Economics and was released in July this year.

The review provided an independent assessment of: the scope and structure of the study; a cost-benefit analysis of extending the study to include emergency responders and other Latrobe Valley residents; the current governance arrangements for the study; and the processes proposed for reporting health information from the study.
STRENGTHENING THE STUDY

The government is working to improve the health and wellbeing of Latrobe Valley communities and the Long Term Health Study remains a valuable source of information for our innovative programs.

The independent review of the study found that it has been well designed to understand and learn from the long term health effects of exposure to the smoke from the mine fire.

The review provided insights into the scope and structure of the study, the benefits of including emergency responders and other Latrobe Valley residents, governance arrangements and reporting of health information.

The government considered these findings and their relationship to the other new developments for innovation, such as the Latrobe Valley Health Assembly that will improve the health and wellbeing of the community.

We will use these insights to strengthen oversight of the study, improve transparency about the governance of the study, and increase and improve opportunities to better engage with the community.

This involves:
- better communicating how the study will benefit the Latrobe Valley
- guaranteeing the study is independent, transparent and accountable
- stronger engagement with the community and health services
- delivering of health improvement through innovation and investment
- connecting to the Latrobe Health Assembly.
WHAT IS THE LONG TERM HEALTH STUDY?

The Long Term Health Study is a comprehensive, 20 year project to understand the potential long term health effects of exposure to the smoke from the 2014 Mine Fire. The study is researching the potential effects of smoke exposure on future rates of cancer, cardiovascular disease, respiratory and psychological illness. The results will help to inform responses to similar events in the future to best reduce the risk of these illnesses.

Monash University is leading a group of researchers who are collecting health information from members of the community who volunteer to participate in this research study, over a period of 20 years. The information provided by these volunteers will be used to assess the potential long term impacts of the Hazelwood coal mine fire on the health of affected communities. This will help to inform health innovation and investment in the Latrobe Valley in the coming years as well as inform the health response for any other community affected by an event similar to the Hazelwood mine fire in the future.

This is an observational study which means collection and analysis of information about the health of study participants and generally does not include diagnosis, treatment and health interventions. Of course, if any health issues or concerns are identified as part of the study, participants will be referred to the most appropriate care and treatment.

The study is broken up into two groups: those living and working in Morwell who were the most exposed to smoke from the mine fire, and participants from Sale who are a ‘control group’ that will be used to compare the health of those living in a similar area but were not exposed to smoke from the mine fire. By comparing these two distinct groups, the researchers can reach conclusions about the potential impact of exposure to the smoke and the possible health effects for all communities across the valley.

Those unable to participate in the study are not missing out on any additional health treatments or services. The study is observational, and does not provide access to additional health benefits or services.

Through the Health Zone and Health Assembly, all Latrobe Valley communities will benefit from the innovations and investments being made by the government across the region.

Residents continue to have access to existing health and support services for any general or specific concerns relating to the mine fire. Through existing health and support services, and other investments, residents from across the Valley have access to health assessments and treatments, generally and in relation to any concerns they have about the mine fire. All Latrobe Valley communities will benefit from the innovations and investments being made by government across the Latrobe Valley, including through the Health Zone and Health Assembly.
SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The independent review examined possible variations to the study to understand the benefits, if any, of including emergency responders and adults who live outside of Morwell. The review also confirmed that the study focus on exposure to carbon monoxide.

EMERGENCY RESPONDERS

The government is continuing to provide effective health monitoring of emergency responders to the Hazelwood Mine Fire, specifically and more broadly across the range of exposures that paid and volunteer responders face on a daily basis.

Exposure to smoke experienced by emergency response personnel differs from the exposure experienced by the general community.

Emergency responders may work closer to the source of smoke and may be exposed for shorter periods as they rotate on and off duty. They generally have access to a range of protective equipment, including breathing apparatus and carbon monoxide monitoring equipment, in order to mitigate this exposure. Further, any health impacts of their exposure to smoke may be cumulative, resulting from their attendance at a number of smoke events in a number of locations over the course of their careers (either paid or volunteer).

The government accepts the analysis in the independent review. In particular, government acknowledges that the study is not the best way to improve the health of any cohort, as it is not designed for that purpose.

The study will not be expanded to include emergency responders at this time. However, the government remains committed to continuing to monitor and understand the occupational health impacts of smoke for emergency responders and will continue to consider ways to enhance programs for the occupational health and safety and wellbeing of emergency responders.

ADULTS LIVING OUTSIDE OF MORWELL

The independent review found that the study has been well designed to understand and learn from the long term health effects of exposure to the smoke from the mine fire.

The participants in the study were chosen so that researchers have the most consistent understanding of their exposure to smoke. Analysis of the data collected from the current participants will be used to understand any possible health impacts for all residents across the Latrobe Valley.

The review also determined that including those who worked in Morwell and lived elsewhere in the Latrobe Valley will not provide greater insight into health outcomes. The government agrees with these findings.

Not being eligible to participate in the study does not result in missing out on health assessments or services.

All communities in the Latrobe Valley will have access to the innovations and investments that are being developed by government through the Latrobe Health Zone and Latrobe Health Assembly.

CARBON MONOXIDE

It is well understood that carbon monoxide has an impact on health, and that in Morwell carbon monoxide levels exceeded the National Environment Protection Measure of nine parts per million on three days in February 2014.

The review asked for confirmation that carbon monoxide was included in the study. The government confirms that carbon monoxide is included in the study and that the potential health effects of carbon monoxide, other criterion pollutants and Polycyclic Aromatic Hydrocarbons, are to be analysed.
AN INDEPENDENT, TRANSPARENT AND ACCOUNTABLE STUDY

The government is committed to ensuring the independence and efficacy of the study. The government will establish an independent committee responsible for overseeing the study that will provide advice and expertise about the study directly to the Minister for Health.

The Hazelwood Health Study Ministerial Advisory Committee will strengthen government oversight of the study and enhance community engagement.

The committee will:

- provide oversight and expertise in how to facilitate community engagement, including communication to the community and stakeholders about the results and progress of the study
- engage with the researchers about the progress of the study and possible applications of the available research data and conclusions
- assess the progress of the study against its contracted milestones
- engage with bodies who are planning or delivering programs for health services or health improvement in the Latrobe Valley, including the Latrobe Health Assembly, about how information from the study can best inform their work
- engage with other researchers undertaking work related to the health of Latrobe Valley communities, or potential health effects of smoke, about how information from the study can best inform their work
- provide expert advice and reports to the Minister about the study to ensure the study’s success.

The Chair and all members of the committee will be appointed by the Minister for Health. For more information about the work of the committee, the terms of reference and how the positions will be appointed visit www2.health.vic.gov.au/emergencies/hazelwood/health-study.

STRONGER ENGAGEMENT WITH THE COMMUNITY AND HEALTH SERVICES

The committee will be tasked with developing better ways to engage the community with the study, including the use of data to help inform health service planning.

There will be an established path of information sharing from the study through to the community, health practitioners and health services planners, including the Latrobe Health Assembly.

This will provide greater transparency and community engagement about how information is being used to inform decisions about the health and wellbeing of residents across the Latrobe Valley. The committee will work in consultation with the Assembly, the study researchers and other health services and health planners to develop these processes.
The government has designated the Latrobe Valley as a Health Innovation Zone to drive innovation in the development and delivery of health services and health improvement programs, supported by the Latrobe Health Assembly.

Initial Government funding of $27 million has been provided to enable innovative delivery of health services and improved health outcomes for Latrobe Valley communities. This includes funding for:

- preventive initiatives to encourage a culture of healthy living in Latrobe
- intervention and screening programs for early identification of health conditions
- greater awareness of how to access community mental health services so people in need are able to reach out when they need help
- better chronic disease management so people have the assistance they need to manage their health concerns
- improved access to specialist health services so that Latrobe Valley patients can access specialist services without long commutes.

It is vital that the study is connected into the broader activities. Therefore, members of the Latrobe Health Assembly will work in partnership with the Hazelwood Health Study Ministerial Advisory Committee to help inform the health planning and innovation undertaken.

Information shared from the study will contribute to a suite of research tools and data sets made available to the Assembly through a range of sources. This will be used to inform the planning, design and implementation of health programs and services to improve health outcomes for the communities of the Latrobe Valley.
To receive this publication in an accessible format email: health.study@dhhs.vic.gov.au

More information

Further information regarding this response can be found on the Department of Health and Human Services website via: https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/emergencies/hazelwood/health-study. This includes a question and answer page regarding the government response.

In addition, information regarding the Long Term Health Study can be found at http://www.hazelwoodhealthstudy.org.au

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