

AMA Victoria's submission to the *Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry*

AMA Victoria welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the *Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry*.

AMA Victoria does not have a direct role in the provision of activities or initiatives in the Latrobe Valley but we are pleased to provide comment on proposals to create a Health Conservation Zone and Health Advocate for the region.

The health impacts of air pollution can range from acute and chronic effects, reproductive and neuro-cognitive defects through to premature mortality. During the 2014 fire, local GPs reported seeing a slight increase in minor respiratory issues, but Ambulance Victoria and Emergency Departments did not report any substantial differences in their workload. Community Health Clinics that were established to monitor residents' health during this period reported seeing very few issues. Despite this, it is possible that longer-term effects could still develop across the local population.

AMA Victoria supports the implementation of the Hazelwood Health Study to monitor any long-term effects that may result from the 2014 fire.

This review is a good opportunity for the State Government to develop a well-rounded, coordinated approach to the health and wellbeing of rural and regional Victorians that takes account of the whole life course, not just physical factors and illness.

To improve the health of residents in the Latrobe Valley, engagement with the medical profession is vital. This engagement must be meaningful and ongoing. Doctors already act as their patient's advocate and will always work in their best interests wherever possible.

Medical practitioners, particularly general practitioners, are best placed to provide detailed advice on the health needs of local residents. General practitioners currently manage the broad range of chronic and complex care which their patients present with and are often the first to notice or be notified of serious social issues, such as domestic violence, that can impact on a person's mental and physical health and wellbeing.

Medical staff working in local hospitals and healthcare centres are the best people to consult regarding the real capacity of the system to respond to emergency events into the future and to manage current and growing demand. Whatever systems are put in place, they must be properly resourced on an ongoing basis, have clear and achievable goals and objectives, and not duplicate existing resources. Until a coordinated, long-term approach to health and wellbeing is adopted, optimum results are not going to be achieved.

Victoria already has multiple plans and processes for the health and wellbeing of the community including the Public Health and Wellbeing Plan, Victorian Health Priorities Frameworks, Rural and Regional Health Plans, local government health plans and plans developed by Medicare Locals/Primary Health Networks. Better coordination and integration of these plans, and the programs that support them, is the first step in improving health outcomes and preventing chronic disease.

Ongoing, reliable and long-term investments in health promotion and prevention programs, such as *Healthy Together Victoria*, is vital. Communities and agencies cannot appropriately plan for their communities' needs, or deliver effective interventions, if they are unsure of funding.

The creation of a Health Conservation Zone in the Latrobe Valley

The *Victorian Health Priorities Framework 2012-2022: Rural and Regional Health Plan* highlights the poorer health outcomes of rural residents compared to metropolitan residents. Statistics show that if you live in the country you may be twice as likely to smoke, and up to two-and-half times more likely to be obese.¹ These health inequalities existed before the fire in 2014 and will continue into the future without coordinated investment in health promotion and prevention from the Government.

¹ AIHW 2014. Australia's health 2014. Australia's health series no. 14. Cat. no. AUS 178. Canberra: AIHW.

Effective health promotion by the State Government can reduce the burden of chronic disease and ease some of the pressures on the health system. Investing in public health improves the overall health and wellbeing of Victoria's population and can represent significant economic and social benefits.

To ensure that Victorians are as healthy as they can be, there needs to be further investment and focus on prevention. Victorians need to be educated and encouraged to make healthier lifestyle decisions, and the Government needs to ensure that the environments within which we live are as healthy as possible.

AMA Victoria is pleased to see that the proposal for a Health Conservation Zone includes consideration of the environmental and social factors that contribute to both physical and mental health and wellbeing. Both these factors are vital in ensuring healthy communities. Poor physical health can adversely impact on mental health, and vice versa, just as environmental and social issues can impact on the physical and mental health of the community.

Before designating the Latrobe Valley as a Health Conservation Zone, the Victorian Government should carefully consider the specific goals and objectives of the change and how they will be achieved. Such a change will require proper assessment and planning, as well as sufficient allocation of resources.

There are already multiple layers of service delivery that aim to improve the health and wellbeing of the community. The Government needs to consider carefully how a designated Health Conservation Zone would work with existing health and wellbeing strategies. Efforts and resources will be duplicated, leading to significant waste, if this kind of policy is imposed over the top of existing protocols and programs. If new programs contradict or compete with existing ones then it is unlikely that substantial, long-term improvements will be made and the capacity of the system to support the community will be reduced.

Before implementing such a policy, the Government should carefully consider how it will interact with existing services, including those operated by government, NGOs and the new Primary Health Networks, and consider whether the community might be better served by improving coordination between existing services rather than implementing a new layer.

The proposal for a Health Conservation Zone provides an opportunity for the Government to review and plan investment across the entire lifespan. To achieve the best results, programs need to be put in place that consider all aspects of a person's wellbeing, from pre-natal support to education, housing, employment, mental health, food security and beyond. This process offers a valuable opportunity for the Government to review current service delivery and establish a better coordinated, whole of Government response.

Latrobe Valley Health Advocate

Strong and effective leadership is vital, particularly during times of emergency. During the 2014 fire, many Morwell residents reported that they did not feel they received enough information and that there were mixed messages about the health risks associated with the smoke that blanketed the town.

In emergency situations, Victorians are reliant on the advice and direction of senior community figures. There needs to be a strong leadership structure in place and these roles need to be properly supported and resourced to ensure that the people in those roles can communicate and lead effectively.

There are already multiple agencies and services undertaking many of the proposed functions of the Health Advocate. Health monitoring, advocacy, facilitation of better health for the community are all roles undertaken by Government and other service providers in the area. These objectives may be just as easily achieved by improving coordination and communication between existing agencies and ensuring they are appropriately resourced to undertake these roles.

For this role to be effective it must be outcomes focussed. There is no use establishing a new role or body to undertake these functions if the information and work undertaken is not used to improve health outcomes.



AMA Victoria supports actions that will improve the health and wellbeing of the Latrobe Valley community but urges the Victorian Government to undertake careful planning and evaluation before simply implementing additional layers of bureaucracy.

While the current review is focussed on the ongoing health outcomes of the Latrobe Valley community this process will provide a good opportunity for the Government to review how it responds to the health needs of rural and regional communities in general.