More Australians are having to become air-quality smart, like being sun smart

With the ongoing bushfire crisis, Australians will need to develop a deeper understanding of air quality, how it is measured, what it means and how to use the information for the benefit of their health.

Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) CEO Terry Slevin said, “Like we had to learn about Ultra Violet Radiation and the sun and its effect on skin cancer, we’ll need to adapt to the new world where clear unpolluted air cannot be taken for granted.”

“The current advice remains, when the air quality is very poor or hazardous, avoid strenuous outdoor activity and physical activities if you are in high risk populations and cut back on those things if you are a healthy adult over 18.”

More people are turning to online data

“Many people are proactively growing their understanding of air-quality issues, made easier with smartphone technology.”

“Since December there has been a five-fold increase in downloads of the AirRater app, which provides free near real-time air quality information for people sensitive to air pollution such as those with asthma and or other lung conditions.”

“It highlights the importance of early notification of changing air quality to enable users to take action to prevent severe symptoms.”

“The app developed by PHAA award recipient Professor Fay Johnston and her team at the University of Tasmania is funded by the smallest jurisdictions, Tasmania, the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory.”

“It captures existing data from government air stations in every state and territory, and weather information provided by the Bureau of Meteorology to cover the vast majority of Australians. It is the only source that shares hourly averages of fine particulate matter (PM2.5) from all around the country.”

“In addition to advice about air quality, the app provides an additional service that has enormous potential. It surveys users, gathering information about their location, symptoms and medications taken in real-time as air-quality fluctuates.”

Australians need and want to know what’s coming

This app is useful because with baseline data, it can tell users when smoke or other pollutants are creeping up. Users can then take preventive measures such as increasing their medication or sealing their homes with plans to stay inside.

More research is needed
“AirRater’s ongoing survey is important as the unprecedented bushfire crisis, which continues to create hazardous levels of smoke, highlights the need for more study going forward.”

“This fire season makes it clear that we need to know much more. This prolonged exposure is a problem millions of Australians are living through for the first time.”

“Experts are exercising their best professional judgement but the reality is we don’t know bushfire smoke’s long-term effects nor have we tested rules about what people should do and when.”

“Further research is needed so that health authorities can give solid advice in future fire seasons, beyond the generic advice we have now about the imperfect role of masks and filters together with avoiding exercise.”

“The evidence is air purifiers or filters are far more effective than masks which are uncomfortable to wear and can limit breathing in other ways.”

“Over time, we will all have to become more literate about air quality so people and communities have the facts to reduce their anxiety, including for employers and employees.”

“That involves a concerted public health campaign that increases public literacy about air pollution; its effects and practical steps people and workplaces can take.”

“Public health relies on reliable air quality monitoring. All jurisdictions must ensure there is consistent health advice and data on GP visits, hospital admissions and other aspects of this emergency so we are well informed to make sound decisions in the future.”

“The Commonwealth is likely to need to step up and do more in this area.”

**Big thinking needed for new policy settings**

“The long-term policy settings also have to change, embracing more ambitious greenhouse gas reduction targets as the most effective way to improve air quality.”

“Global warming exacerbates fire conditions by contributing to prolonged droughts and high temperatures. It also raises questions about fire management and hazard reduction in the future.”

“But caution must be exercised because when we reduce the direct risk of fire with prescribed burns, we can worsen air quality. Hazard reduction must be seen in light of a whole systems approach.”

“That means we need to look at forest/landscape management holistically in the context of environmental change and Indigenous land management practices,” Mr Slevin said.

**ENDS**

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