30 October 2014

Hon. David Davis, MLC
Minister for Health
Department of Health
50 Lonsdale Street
Melbourne VIC 3000
Email: Minister.Davis@health.vic.gov.au

Dear Minister

Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry – Final Report

The Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) provides a forum for the exchange of ideas, knowledge and information on public health. The PHAA is also involved in advocacy for public health policy, development, research and training. The PHAA Victorian Branch has members in health service, research, government and community sectors.

The PHAA is writing to you regarding the Final Report of the Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry (the Final Report). The PHAA wishes to comment on three particular aspects of the Final Report. These are:

(1) Long-term Health Study
(2) Health Conversation Zone
(3) Latrobe Valley Health Advocate.

(1) Long-term Health Study

The Department of Health has committed to undertake a ten year health study into the potential long-term adverse health effects of the Hazelwood Mine fire on the Morwell community.

The PHAA welcomes the concept of a health study and we agree with the Final Report’s statement that:

a long-term study would be an extremely useful predictive tool to assist with understanding future risks, and to prevent or reduce the chances of adverse health effects arising from similar situations in the future.

As a community’s health can be influenced by many factors, we also support the Report’s recommendation that – in addition to the physical health effects from smoke and ash exposure, the long-term health study should focus on the mental health impact of the Hazelwood Mine fire – specifically the impact of the fire on levels of family violence and drug and alcohol abuse.

Recommendation Ten states that the Victorian Government should continue the long-term health study for at least 20 years. This recommendation is based on the expert report of Professor Donald Campbell, Professor of Medicine at Monash University.

While the PHAA would value any evidentiary material derived from the long-term health study, we note that a clinical study of twenty years’ duration would necessarily involve a further, significant investment of money and resources and associated opportunity costs.
PHAA is of the view that a study of 20 years’ duration would have much greater potential impact if it is designed using participatory or action-research principles to clearly include local community engagement and location-specific interventions. Such an approach would enable the study to become an important vehicle of health protection and improvement in its own right, in addition to its purely scientific merit.

(2) Health Conservation Zone

One of the matters that the Final Report identified for further consideration was the creation of a Health Conversation Zone in the Latrobe Valley. The purpose of the Health Conservation Zone would be to significantly improve the health of the Latrobe Valley community by coordinating and integrating health services with responses that tackle the broader social and environmental determinants of health. The Final Report proposes that the Health Conservation Zone should focus on the prevention and management of chronic diseases and the creation of supportive environments for health.

The PHAA welcomes and supports the Health Conversation Zone concept as concentrated attention is needed to improve the health and wellbeing of people living in the Latrobe Valley – especially after the Hazelwood Mine Fire.

Nonetheless, if the Health Conversation Zone were to be introduced, it would need to be done in a strategic and positive way. We are concerned about the possibility of a “Health Conservation Zone” having a negative connotation and the potential risk of stigma for people living in it if the Latrobe Valley is designated the first and only Health Conservation Zone in Australia. For instance, while the Healthy Together Victoria program identified Latrobe Valley as one of the areas in Victoria that had poor health and wellbeing indicators, it was one of twelve such locations around the state.

PHAA recommends further consideration be given to the naming of such an initiative and community consultation be sought on this topic.

(3) Health Advocate for the Latrobe Valley

Another issue that the Final Report identified for further consideration was the appointment of a Health Advocate for the Latrobe Valley. The purpose of the Health Advocate would be to provide a local health voice for the Latrobe Valley community and be a sound source of advice, mediation and advocacy on health-related matters.

The Final Report proposes that the Health Advocate could also act as a champion for the Health Conservation Zone, and be actively engaged in the governance and follow up arrangements for the long-term health study.

The PHAA strongly endorses the idea of a Health Advocate as the role would be a key initiative to improve the ongoing health and wellbeing of Latrobe Valley residents as well as be instrumental in supporting other initiatives such as the Health Conversation Zone and health study.

The PHAA believes that a local medical professional with knowledge and skills in public health would be the most appropriate person for the Health Advocate position. Such a person would be both known and respected as a health and medical authority in the Latrobe Valley, and be seen as truly independent of government and thereby able to garner community trust and offer the frank and fearless advice to government that would be critical to success in the role.
Remuneration for this role would be crucial, as would appropriate supporting staff and resources to enable delivery of the function. Accountability for the role could be through existing statutory positions or authorities, such as the office of the Chief Health Officer and/or the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, VicHealth.

We would welcome the opportunity to speak further with you or your staff about the Long-term Health Study, the proposed Health Conservation Zone and the Health Advocate position.

Yours sincerely,

Michael Moore
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Bruce Bolam
President, PHAA Victorian Branch

Dr Peter Tait
Convenor, PHAA Ecology and Environment Special Interest Group