



Impacts of the Hazelwood mine fire on students and staff from a specialist school which relocated during the smoke event Research Summary

July 2018

Analysis aims

The primary aim of this study was to examine the impact of the smoke event on wellbeing, educational outcomes and teaching practices for students and staff at a specialist school which relocated during the smoke event. A secondary aim was to explore whether the trauma-informed model of practice already in use at the school provided a framework which assisted students and staff during the event.

Meet the team

Dr Emily Berger

Dr Matthew Carroll

Prof Darryl Maybery

Mr Dylan Harrison



Background

The fire in the Morwell open cut brown coal mine adjacent to the Hazelwood Power Station blanketed the town of Morwell and the surrounding area in smoke and ash for six weeks in February and March 2014. The smoke event was recognised as one of the most significant air quality incidents in Victoria's history, with the concentration of smoke contaminants reaching high levels. The smoke event caused considerable community concern within Morwell and across the Latrobe Valley. In response to these concerns, and following extensive community consultation, the Hazelwood Health Study (HHS) was established to examine the impacts of the mine fire. The HHS involves multiple research streams targeting different health outcomes and different vulnerable groups.



What we found

Impacts on student wellbeing included increased anxiety and frustration, difficulty adjusting to the relocation environment, reduced sense of safety and a drop in both attendance and schoolwork completion. Increased stress at home was also reported. Staff reported their own frustration and anxiety around the event including difficulty obtaining information. Staff noted that the event created challenges on both a personal and professional level, with some reporting concerns for themselves and their families at the same time as working hard to look after the students. The relocation of the school imposed extra duties upon staff, reduced their access to teaching resources and increased the time spent dealing with behavioural issues.

On a positive note, the school relocation reduced exposure to the smoke and permitted the school to do more outdoor activities with the students. In addition, the school's use of a trauma-informed approach to teaching provided considerable insights into how best to support students during this period.



What we did

Eight school staff were interviewed, including administrative, teaching and support personnel. The school caters for students aged 12 to 18 years who have stopped attending, or been excluded, from mainstream education because of traumatic, behavioural, emotional, learning and/or family and relationship challenges. The school uses an evidence informed, three-tiered, trauma-based model of care. Interviews followed a semi-structured, face to face format. The first part of the interview included open-ended questions about the effect of the event on student and staff wellbeing, learning and teaching. The second part focused on coping both at the time and since the event. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, returned to participants for review and then analysed to identify recurring themes.



Where to from here

This research comprises just one part of the HHS Psychological Impacts Stream. Future activities for this stream include the resurveying of Adult Survey participants and the analysis of data recently collected from Latrobe Valley school children. Integration of this work with that of the HHS Community Wellbeing Stream will facilitate knowledge about how best to support recovery in the community.

Considerations

The findings are from one specialist school and are not necessarily reflective of the experiences of all school staff following traumatic experiences. In addition, the unique nature of this prolonged community-wide pollution event means that the issue of relocation may not be applicable to all disaster events in which schools are required to respond.

An improvement in the design of the study would be to explore the experiences of the entire school community, including students and families, and to further explore the contribution of parent distress on child outcomes.

The Hazelwood Health Study is a collaborative program of research led by the Monash University Schools of Public Health and Preventive Medicine and Rural Health in partnership with Federation University, the Menzies Institute for Medical Research at the University of Tasmania, the University of Adelaide and the CSIRO.

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