

Hazelwood Mine Fire Health Study

Project Scientific Reference Group Meeting 1/2018

Monday 23 July, 5.15-6.30pm

Meeting Room 2, Level 2, 553 St Kilda Road
and by Zoom

MEETING NOTES

1. In attendance

Professor Ross Coppel (chair), Professor Michael Abramson, Professor Michael Ackland, Associate Professor Graeme Zosky, Associate Professor Rebecca Kippen, Professor John McNeil, Dr Melita Keywood, Professor Anna Hansell, Dr Jillian Blackman, Dr Sharon Harrison (meeting notes)

Apologies

Professor Alexander McFarlane, Associate Professor Jane Ford, Professor Rory Wolfe, Dr Michael Keating, Professor Margaret Alston

2. Welcome & introductions

Ross Coppel advised that he had accepted a request from Michael Abramson to chair the SRG. MA made this request so that the SRG is chaired by a member who is independent of the HHS research team.

The SRG members introduced themselves. Michael Ackland was attending his first meeting since he joined the SRG.

3. Conflict of Interest

Michael Ackland reported that he was previously employed by the Department of Health and Human Services and acted as Chief Health Officer prior to his retirement in January 2016. In his capacity as acting Chief Health Officer, he handled matters relating to the Hazelwood mine fire.

4. Minutes of previous meeting

The minutes of Meeting 2/2017 on 11 December 2017 were accepted without amendment.

5. Year 4 Interim Report

Michael Abramson reported that the HHS Year 4 Interim Report had been submitted to DHHS and has been accepted by the Department. The Interim Report is one of the Study's two key deliverables each year – the other deliverable is the Annual Report. This report was circulated to SRG members for information.

MA advised that Interim Reports are not confidential, but are not posted on the HHS website. Annual Reports are posted on the HHS website.

MA advised that the annual Community Engagement session will be held on 22 August 2018. This session is a project milestone requirement under the contract with DHHS.

John McNeil asked about progress with clinical testing. MA confirmed that the first round of clinical testing is complete and that the next round of clinical testing is due in 2020.

6. Dissemination of Findings

MA advised that in addition to the Interim and Annual Reports that are produced each year, Study findings are also disseminated through separate technical reports prepared by the individual research streams. The Adult Survey Volume 1 was released in 2017. The Latrobe Early Life Follow-up (ELF) Cohort Study Volume 1, which described the ELF Study cohort and preliminary assessment of possible associations between mine fire emissions and parent-reported perinatal outcomes, was released in early 2018. Each technical report that has been released has been accompanied by a research summary and a media release.

At this stage, detailed results are coming through for Research Streams. The PhD students involved in the ELF Study are leading the preparation of the ELF Report Volume 2 and are also working on papers for their theses by publication. Fay Johnston, Stream Lead for the ELF Study, has raised the issue of disseminating findings prior to research findings being subject to peer review. It was noted that some of the data collected are novel and it is important that research findings are peer-reviewed before release.

It was noted that DHHS owns the HHS Intellectual Property and an agreement needs to be met regarding what we should tell the community and at what stage.

JB noted that journals will not publish work that is already in the public domain, thus if findings are released in the form of technical reports published on the HHS website, this could preclude publication in a journal. FJ has therefore indicated that she would like to delay the release of the technical reports until the papers have undergone peer-review and have been published.

JB emphasized that the needs of academic staff also need to be taken into account because career progression is dependent on publications. This University's policy is clear on the need for researchers to be able to publish their work.

JB noted that researchers do not want to be seen to be withholding reports. It was suggested that one way of getting around this problem would be to delay the release of technical reports, while publications are undergo external scientific review, and release a research summary. AH suggested that this approach would be a good compromise, noting that the findings for studies she has been involved with in relation to municipal waste incineration and Heathrow Airport were not released until peer-preview was complete and the research was exempt from Freedom of Information requests.

It was noted that while there have not been any specific complaints, members of the community do ask why the release of findings takes so long.

RC asked about the ELF cohort. MA reported that participants were recruited from across the Latrobe Valley. RC raised the issue of reporting of incidental health outcomes that lie outside the Study research questions and whether we are obliged to report on everything we find?

MA suggested that there are some grey areas with respect to the Study findings. Researchers have not found an association between exposure and low birth weight. However they have identified a clear impact from maternal smoking.

JB emphasized that it is important that the Study puts in place a process for the release of all findings going forward.

SRG members discussed preprint servers where articles can be submitted prior to the completion of peer-review. RC advised that the uploading of papers to preprint servers is not happening in the field of microbiology.

RC suggested that a tiered release process seems to be a sensible compromise. SRG members approved a tiered release process while research findings are undergoing peer-review.

7. Adult Survey

7.1. Hazelwood Health Study Report Volume 2 (Draft)

The results tables for the Adult Survey Report Volume 2 were displayed. JB reported that the biostatistician Caroline Gao has divided participants into tertiles. AH queried how the cumulative mean was calculated. JB advised that the CSIRO data for the PM_{2.5} concentration for each hour of each day was used that that these averages were added together to calculate a cumulative exposure score.

The SRG discussed the tables and figures showing distribution of self-reported respiratory symptoms and conditions by mine fire related PM_{2.5} exposure category, respiratory symptoms and conditions reported by participants with low, medium and high mine fire PM_{2.5} exposure, each compared to those with no exposure, and self-reported psychological wellbeing measures by mine fire related PM_{2.5} exposure category.

The SRG discussed the issues affecting exposure levels, for example whether someone was outside versus inside, the construction type of homes and the use of air-conditioners.

It was suggested that researchers have a longer discussion off-line with AH following the meeting to discuss the best approach for expressing exposure.

The SRG discussed the issue of how concentrations changed over the duration of the mine fire event, with the greatest levels of exposure during the first three weeks of the mine fire, noting that the number of days examined would have a big effect on mean concentrations. It was noted that analysis could be done again, looking at the first three weeks of the mine fire.

JB noted that at this stage researchers are finalising the tables that will be included in the Adult Survey Report Volume 2 and proposed that the draft report be circulated to SRG members for comment. SRG members requested that they would like to see the tables and figures for the report now and the discussion of findings when it is ready.

8. Hazelinks Data Linkages

JB reported that to date researchers have received the following anonymised data extracts: Ambulance attendances data (VACIS), Cardiac arrest registry data (VACAR), Hospitals admission data (VAED), Emergency presentations data (VEMD), Victorian Cancer data (VCR), Healthcare utilisation data (MBS), Medication dispensing data (PBS) and Death data (NDI and NMD). Researchers have submitted applications for linked data to Ambulance Victoria, the Department of Health and Human Services and the Victorian Cancer Registry and are waiting for this data to be released.

9. Schools Study

JB reported that the Schools Study is currently busy with the second round of recruitment in the field. The Schools Study tried to recruit a new cohort of Year 3 students this year. Some members of the community had raised the concern that children in this age group had been left out because they were not included in the ELF Study or the previous round of recruitment for the Schools Study. However the recruitment of a new cohort of Year 3 students has proved difficult. The feedback that has been received is that many parents feel that the period that has elapsed since the mine fire is too long and parents are disinterested. Year 9 students have also proved difficult to recruit.

10. Early Life Follow-up

MA reported that there are two draft technical reports for the ELF cardiovascular and respiratory findings. These reports have been circulated to researchers/reference group members with relevant expertise. FJ has set up a reference group for ELF, which includes Professor Graham Hall who has reviewed the respiratory report. Professor Bruce Thompson is also reviewing the Respiratory report.

The ELF Stream is currently waiting on the release of perinatal data from Centre for Victorian Data Linkage after receiving approval from the Australian Institute for Health and Welfare.

John McNeil requested a copy of the ELF CV report be sent to him.

11. Clinical Streams

JB reported that clinical testing was completed in early May and that the team was successful in achieving the target number of participants. An allowance has been built in for attrition. The clinical data collected were stored in the devices and is currently being cleaned and validated.

11.1. *Respiratory Stream*

MA advised that researchers are preparing a paper on asthma and asthma control.

11.2. *Cardiovascular Stream*

Victorian Public Health Medical Trainee Scheme Research Fellow Dr Juliana Betts is leading the analysis on hypertension and has found that there are high levels of undiagnosed and under managed hypertension amongst Study participants.

Fifth-Year Monash Medical student Roshan Maniam has done some work on the CV data, looking at estimated Glomerular Filtration Rate (eGFR).

The SRG discussed the Victorian Cardiac Outcomes Registry (VCOR) and VACAR (Victorian Ambulance Cardiac Arrest Registry data. John McNeil advised that originating postcode of the patient is recorded. He suggested researchers seek advice from Dion Stub/Angela Brennan regarding the Victorian Cardiac Outcomes Registry data.

SRG members requested that a one-page table, outlining progress with each Stream be circulated with the SRG meeting papers.

12. Governance – Ministerial Advisory Committee, Latrobe Health Advocate

RC advised that he has been approached by the MAC, which requested that he attend a meeting with them, suggesting that the MAC sounded genuinely interested in how the Study is going. RC was invited at short notice and had to delay attending the meeting. He requested that the Principal Investigator provide a list of talking points for him to take to the meeting.

MA outlined the developments in the Latrobe Valley, specifically the role of the Latrobe Health Assembly chaired by John Catford, the Latrobe Health Assembly, the Latrobe Health Innovation Zone and the recent appointment of Jane Anderson as the Latrobe Health Advocate.

MA and MC are due to meet with Jane Anderson this week. It was suggested that this should be used as an opportunity to discuss public health issues identified through the HHS, including the management of hypertension, maternal smoking and management of asthma.

13. Other Business

The SRG discussed the State election that will be held in November. It was proposed that a briefing should be held for all the candidates running in the local electorate in the Latrobe Valley.

Michael Ackland advised that the Department of Health and Human Services would provide a briefing for the opposition ahead of the State election and that Hazelwood researchers should be prepared for the possibility that the Department may request information in the lead up to the State election.

It was suggested that contact be made with the University's government relations office. MA noted that it is hoped Judi Walker will be back in a couple of months and will be able to assist with this engagement work in the Latrobe Valley.

MA advised that the HHS Annual Report will be due in November. This will be referred to members if feedback is needed.

14. Next Meeting

A Doodle Poll will be circulated for the date of the next meeting. It was proposed that the next meeting be held in the second half of November after the State election.