



27 February 2017

Media Release: Study shows improved responses needed for older people in public health emergency

Policy recommendations aimed at improving the responses of service providers and decision makers to older people in the event of a public health emergency have been developed by the Hazelwood Health Study.

The study team this week released findings regarding the impacts of the 2014 Hazelwood Mine Fire on older people and the supports and services made available to them during the event.

Following extensive conversations with more than 90 older residents and 17 health and community service providers and decision makers - as well as research and policy reviews and analysis of decisions made at the time of smoke event – researchers found supports had broken down with those they referred to as ‘robust older people’.

“It was clear from our work that the smoke event impacted very differently on older people, depending upon, for example, their existing health or previous experience with fire events,” said Investigator Professor Judi Walker.

The study found that while service providers did their best to assist older people known to them, including agencies doorknocking those receiving home care and attending to those in residential care, older people in generally good health who were not already receiving services were not well targeted and received only general community-wide communications.

A major concern identified by those interviewed was the method and type of communication used to reach them during the mine fire.

“We identified that statements made at the time which referred to ‘vulnerable older people’ ran the risk of alienating older people who did not consider themselves to be vulnerable,” Professor Walker said.

Recommendations for change had evolved from the responses of study participants, Professor Walker said.

“Respondents argued that local spokespeople should take the lead in communicating with the community, that age-relevant people should be involved at all stages and that messages need to be delivered via multiple streams rather than an over-reliance on fact sheets and websites.

“Participants also suggested making use of existing community groups involving older people and going to where they gather, rather than expecting them to locate and respond to communications.”

Professor Walker said the content of messages required careful consideration and options provided to older people needed be accessible and achievable. “For example, options of free train travel and other relocation recommendations though well intended, were difficult for older people with limited mobility or no access to transport, to take up.”

Co-researcher Dr Matthew Carroll said information gathered from the study would now be used “to work with service providers and decision makers to improve responses to older people during future events”.

Further research will also be conducted to examine the health and wellbeing impacts on older people, over time, as part of the Adult Survey and Psychological Impacts streams of the Hazelwood Health Study.

More information on the research is available at
<http://hazelwoodhealthstudy.org.au/research-areas/older-people/>