Hazelwood HEALTH STUDY

Community perceptions of the impact of the Hazelwood mine fire on community wellbeing, and of the effectiveness of communication during and after the fire
Research Summary

May 2019

Analysis aims
This analysis presents community perceptions of the impact of the smoke event on community wellbeing, and the elements that are important for effective communication during and after the smoke event.

Meet the Team
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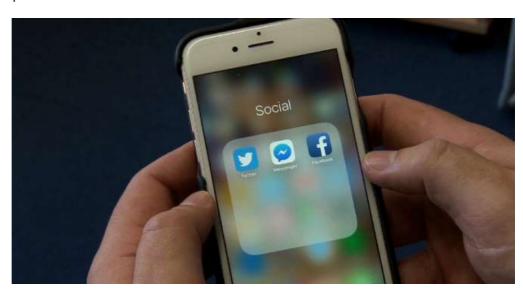Dr Larissa Walker
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The Community Wellbeing Stream is led by Federation University. The HHS is led by Monash University with collaborators from Federation University, the University of Tasmania, the University of Adelaide and CSIRO.

The research was funded by the Department of Health and Human Services.

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. It caused considerable community concern within Morwell and the broader community. In response to these concerns, and following extensive community consultation, the Hazelwood Health Study was established to examine the impacts of the mine fire. The HHS involves multiple research streams targeting different health outcomes and different vulnerable groups.

The **Community Wellbeing Stream** is the part of the Hazelwood Health Study that looks at the impact of the smoke event on the community wellbeing of those living in Morwell and the Latrobe Valley. This includes looking at the communication during and after the mine fire, and at the community rebuilding efforts that have taken place since the fire.

What we did

We held group discussions with community members and interviewed people from community organisations and agencies involved in the emergency response and recovery, local journalists and social media users. We also collected media articles about the mine fire, along with social media posts by community members on three local Facebook groups. We interviewed a total of 85 people, and analysed 1,096 media reports and 1,709 social media posts.

What we found

We found that the event had a substantial impact on community wellbeing, most notably a loss of trust in the authorities dealing with the crisis. The main factors leading to this loss of trust were the problems with communication and information, the lack of an emergency plan and a sense on the part of some in the community that the government, authorities and GDF Suez (the owners of the mine and power station) had not accepted responsibility for what happened and were not held accountable.

This loss of trust also led some community members and groups to take matters into their own hands, finding ways to support one another, meet the needs of those impacted by the fire, and lobby for government to address their concerns. Social media had an important function in enabling community groups to organise and express themselves.

These initiatives were important to addressing the concerns of the community and determining ways forward. However, many questioned the motives of those who took on this work, while others were concerned about the repercussions on the reputation of the community.

Problems with official communication during the smoke event played a prominent part in the community's distress. Local media and social media were important in filling information gaps and representing the concerns of the wider community, while at the same time reflecting some of the divisions and conflicts in this diverse community. In reflecting on what could have been done better in communicating with the community, our interviewees mentioned a number of elements important for effective communication. These were:

- media and social media as a sounding board and a strategic resource;
- fast, accurate and honest communication;
- a broad range of channels;
- face-to-face communication is important;
- a trusted spokesperson, preferably someone local;
- empathic communication;
- continuity of spokespeople;
- a local communications team.

A copy of the full report describing the findings from the analysis can be found at
http://hazelwoodhealthstudy.org.au/publications

Where to from here?

A further report is being prepared which presents our findings on community perceptions of the effectiveness of community rebuilding activities. Additional data collection is planned to track the ongoing wellbeing of the community.

Considerations

The findings of this study would be useful for policy and planning for future disasters. They show that there is a requirement to listen to the community, address their concerns and communicate with them honestly, accurately and empathically, using appropriate channels and trusted spokespersons. To do so promotes a relationship of trust between community members and agencies involved in disaster, so necessary for effective disaster response and management. In addition, we argue for the development of a comprehensive disaster management plan which recognises the specific needs and risks for this community, and which includes a communications and community engagement strategy.
While every attempt was made to speak to a broad array of individuals and organisations, it is possible that the participant sample may not represent the full range of viewpoints.