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Communications in future disaster events: best policy practice for older people

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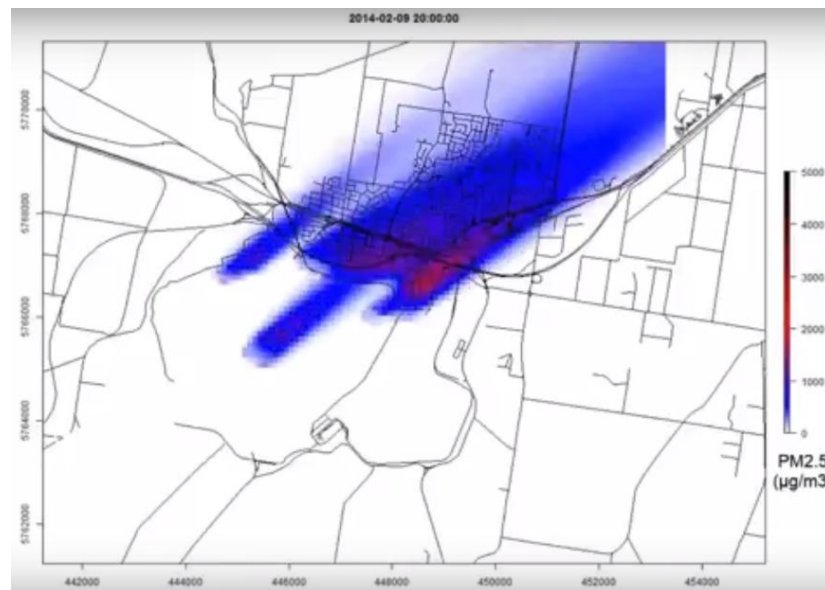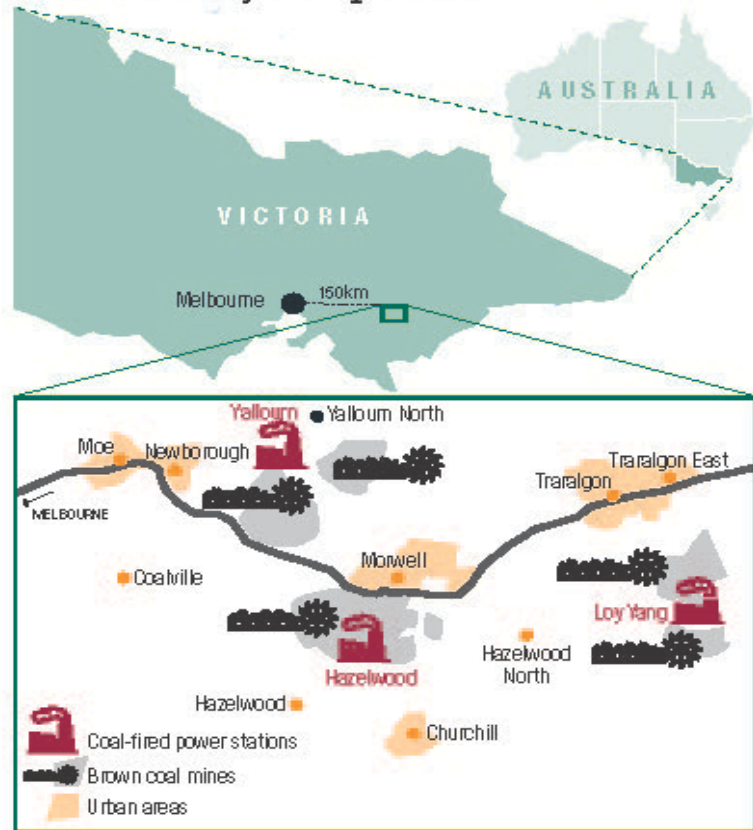
OVERVIEW OF PRESENTATION

- The Latrobe Valley
- The smoke event
- Community response
- Government response
- Older People Research Stream
- Impact of communications during the event on older people
- Key considerations for policy development

THE SMOKE EVENT

- Two fires burnt over the weekend with embers from both fires spotting into the open cut coal mine adjacent to Morwell on Sunday 9 Feb 2014 resulting in the mine fire that produced smoke that blanketed the region for 45+ days

- After a substantial effort involving fire brigades from across the state and country, the fire was declared safe on 25 March

- Modelling of the smoke event by the CSIRO shows the areas of the Latrobe Valley that were impacted by the smoke plume

- We have just completed this modelling which estimates how much particulate matter was deposited in different areas. It confirms that Morwell was the most exposed

CSIRO Modelled PM2.5 exposure on first day of fire

BACKGROUND – THE COMMUNITY AND HOW IT RESPONDED

- Morwell: a town of 13,700 people in the Latrobe Valley in regional Victoria

- The town is in the centre of Victoria's power generation region, with the Morwell mine and [the now closed] Hazelwood power station adjacent to the town

- Morwell population is older than state average (19.3% Morwell 65+ compared to 14.2% for state) with the area closest to the Morwell mine older again

- The area is among the lowest in the state in terms of socio-economic and health indicators. It experienced significant decline since privatisation of the energy sector in 1990s

- The smoke event galvanised the community leading to the establishment of advocacy groups and a petition signed by over 25,000 people calling for a long term health study of the smoke impacts
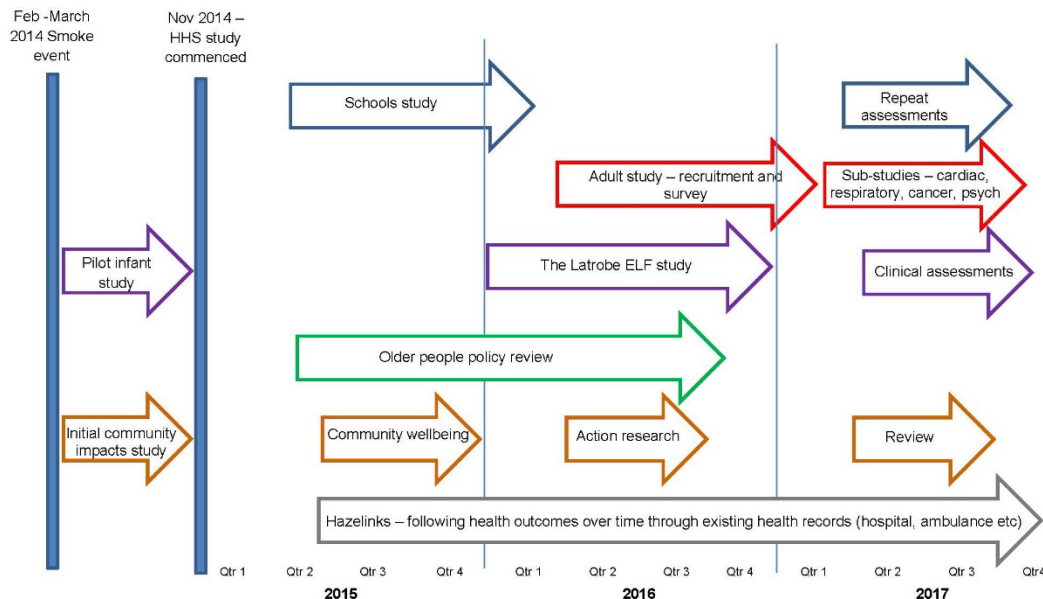
BACKGROUND – THE GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

- The state government undertook a series of community consultations in May 2015, mapping the concerns of the community

- Result: funding and establishment of the 10-year Hazelwood Health Study, with recognition that study needs to extend for 20+ years

OLDER PEOPLE RESEARCH STREAM

- The aim of this component of the Hazelwood Health Study was to assess the impact of the smoke event on older people focusing particularly on a review of the policy decisions made with respect to older people during the event

- The objective was to inform best practice for future emergency events. This work was completed in November 2016

- We used a mix of research methodologies combining the findings from focus groups held with over 90 local older people and interviews with 17 decision makers and service providers, with reviews of relevant literature and various government policies

- Conclusions drawn were verified in a workshop with key respondents

OLDER PEOPLE RESEARCH STREAM

By combining the results of qualitative analyses with our analyses of the published literature, the policy context and the chronology of the event, we have been able to gain an understanding of the experience of the event on older people

Findings summarised under 4 broad thematic headings:

- The impact of the Hazelwood mine fire event on older people

- The impact of policy-driven decisions made at the time on older people

- The impact of the jumbled roles of emergency services and agencies on older people

- **The impact of communications during the event on older people**

Hazelwood
HEALTH STUDY

THE IMPACT OF COMMUNICATIONS DURING THE EVENT ON OLDER PEOPLE

The recurring issue arising throughout the research process was the requirement to listen to and include the voices of older people

KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND PROGRAM PLANNING

1. The criticality of who is delivering the message

2. The criticality of how the message is delivered

3. The criticality of who is being targeted

4. The criticality of communications with older people to re-build and maintain confidence and trust

THE CRITICALITY OF WHO IS DELIVERING THE MESSAGE

- Guarantee consistency among spokespersons
- Appoint spokespersons who are seen to be part of the event
- Respond to the clear preference for local government to take the communications lead
- Provide age-relevant spokespersons
- Make use of existing community groups involving older people

It felt like one message was being delivered from, you know, a complete lack of experience in the actual event from what they were actually seeing, feeling, experiencing.

The CFA in my view are excellent fire fighters, but they're not so good with communicating with community ... They're not experienced in that sort of work

You know but it is, you know I think we do miss some of that, we miss that, just that life experience and that diversity, that richness that older people do bring into decision making in governments and the way we operate

THE CRITICALITY OF HOW THE MESSAGE IS DELIVERED

- Ensure roles and responsibilities among and between agencies are known and understood to reduce anxiety and confusion among older people
- Avoid presenting older people in an unfairly negative light
- Engage with the older community – two way conversations showing empathy and understanding
- Provide comprehensible and do-able information
- Avoid conflicting communications and misinformation
- Provide simple and helpful emergency information via social media from a clearly identifiable and trusted source
- Avoid leaving an emergency information vacuum which may be filled by less informed respondents

It's having a coordinated approach to the way we engage … that might mean you know, the Chief Health Officer's messages are more distributed going forward, … delivered by others a lot more, in different modes to what it was previously

You see miscommunication is even worse than no communication

What would be useful for an older person, any person really? Calming messages for a start

I got a message on my mobile…it told me to evacuate and I ran around and I'm thinking 'where do I go and how do I get out of here' because I've got no car

THE CRITICALITY OF WHO IS BEING TARGETED

- Demonstrate awareness of all the vulnerabilities of older people and how they play out together
- Demonstrate awareness of the needs of the 'robust elderly' who do not receive health and community services who may not receive health and community services and so may be in greater need during an emergency event

They [older people] were incredibly stoic, we had to delve to find if they really did need something, even if it was us just going and doing the shopping for them, so they didn't have to go out, you know, and I think, honestly, it was the older members of the community that weathered the event far better than the younger members of the community

None of us had money…were waiting for the next pension day. So even if we were able to go somewhere we didn't have the money

I was getting messages from the health officer that we should relocate people with lung, with a lung condition, respiratory and heart conditions, should move out of town. That was a hard request because how many people could do it?

THE CRITICALITY OF COMMUNICATIONS WITH OLDER PEOPLE TO RE-BUILD AND MAINTAIN CONFIDENCE AND TRUST

- Actively communicate what has changed, the protocols in place, changes in agency structure, relevant new policies and procedures, mitigation and prevention strategies
- Make use of existing community groups involving older people to disseminate information
- Make use of disaster management exercises to involve agency personnel and community volunteers and engage with local media

I think it's, you know, I think it's come a long way in that space, but we have a long way to go, but (pause) changing the way we do that, you know co-designing the engagement operations with the community, and you know, I guess co-designing the model going forward it a big part of that

[Since the fire] we've used very different tools and tactics around how we actually engage with other local agencies and service providers to help us with our communications activities, to engage with you know, local trusted persons voices.

- These policy consideration in relation to communication and engagement with older people are based on conclusions drawn from the research where older people generously gave their time
- They have important implications for best practice policy development and program planning
- This should improve preparedness for and response to a future disaster event

Can I just make one more comment – assuming that the Hazelwood power station is closed, one way or the other, or the owners walk away, which has been another possibility, which has been, you know in the gossip in the media. Assuming that happens that mine is still going to be there, and the rehabilitation plans are far from composed at this point

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