Beyond vulnerability: older people’s roles in a rural emergency event

Professor Judi Walker
Principal Co-Investigator
Hazelwood Health Study

Dr Matthew Carroll
Investigator
Hazelwood Health Study
The Hazelwood mine fire, in the Latrobe Valley in south-eastern Victoria, burnt for 45+ days in Feb-March 2014 covering region in smoke and ash.

CSIRO modelling shows that adjacent community (Morwell) exceeded national PM$_{2.5}$ air quality standards on 23 days.

Considerable community concern about the health impacts of the smoke resulted in the establishment of a 10-year multi-stream Hazelwood Health Study.

Impacts were on top of existing issues with Morwell among the lowest in the state in terms of SES and health indicators since privatisation of the energy sector in 1990s.
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.
Much of the communication seen as one-way, overly technical, and coming from state-level spokespeople rather than trusted voices within the rural community.

*there was a bloke who came down was supposedly to be an authority about what was happening around us and he went back to Melbourne so he could sleep”*

*We have a relationship with our community. These people from Melbourne or whatever do not have a relationship with the community.*

The messaging was seen as alienating to older people, with its references to ‘vulnerable older people’.

*So the elderly were always, I think, absolutely considered a vulnerable group that we needed to be focusing on.*

*I think part of our challenge is the voice of older people is really faint. In all levels of government be it local, state or federal...*
Robust older people – a valuable resource

While the emergency response labelled them as vulnerable, this was too simplistic.

*the younger generation were far more demanding and needing than the older people. They were incredibly stoic, we had to delve to find if they really did need something.*

This stoicism was due in part to having dealt with challenges in the past.

*I just regarded it as “been there done that” because there had been, during my life time, had been quite a few small fires in the Yallourn open cut. [neighbouring mine]*

**Key lessons:**

- Avoid age stereotypes – older ≠ vulnerable
- Rather than talking at them, need to develop a 2-way approach with age-relevant spokespeople linking in to existing community groups.
- Need to tap into their experiences of past events to better plan for future events.

**Where next:**

- We mapping out a research program that will better understand vulnerability and develop a communications approach working directly with the older community.