Fw: Morwell Mine Fire Submission
info to: [redacted]
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14/05/2014 02:00 PM

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Hazelwood Inquiry info/DPC@DTF
12/05/2014 04:59 PM

To Hazelwood Inquiry info/DPC@DTF
cc
bcc
Subject Morwell Mine Fire Submission

Title: Mrs

First Name: Brenda

Surname: Maguire

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Content of submission (you can choose multiple): Response to fire by Public Health Officials, Response to fire by Other Government Agencies

Please select one of the following options: I acknowledge that my submission will be treated as a public document and may be published, quoted or summarised by the Inquiry.

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Fire-submission.docx

I am making this submission because I believe the handling of the Hazelwood mine fire by Government Public Health and other Government Officials was extremely ineffective in supporting promotion of public mental and physical health.

As an individual I was placed in a position to make judgement calls about how to protect the health of my family, without any solid evidence or guidelines provided by the Authorities. I believe it is simply ridiculous I, an everyday citizen, was required to 'Google' for relevant information to base my decisions on.

Surely The Victorian Government must have access to high level research studies, and overseas experts from which they could quickly access relevant evidence from which to base their decisions on actions relating to preserving community health.

My specific concerns include:

- Advice given to the public by Dr Rosemary Lester slowly and subtly changed over the period of the fire, tending towards admitting the smoke was a health risk - yet the town was never evacuated.

  Initially Dr Lester suggested people stay indoors if affected by the smoke, and unaffected people avoid rigorous outdoor activity.
  I believe this encouraged people to place their health at risk by:
  - staying in Morwell
  - continuing to be active outside
  - diminishing the importance of the health effects people were experiencing
  - downplaying the importance of avoiding the smoke
  - subtly suggesting only those showing signs and feeling symptoms were suffering damage to their health
  - not mentioning use of PPE
  - not encouraging those in high risk populations to leave town immediately.

  Over the course of the fire Dr Lester's advice changed to suggesting those who can leave town do so.
  This advice acknowledged the dangers of the smoke and shows the prior advice was insufficient to protect the health of the town's residents.
  It also shows the Government admits there were dangers posed from the smoke, and were happy to leave some residents exposed to these dangers. These were the residents whom by no reasonable choice of their own were unable to leave town.

  The slowly evolving advice given by Dr Lester in this situation portrayed her to be incompetent and untrustworthy. Her delivery of information was truly orchestrated, with no firm advice for anyone to leave Morwell issued until well into the fire, after

some of the earliest and worst days of smoke. Her reluctance to admit any danger has placed the health of 14,000 people at risk.

I suggest Dr Lester should have been honest from the outset with the people of Morwell. If she didn't know enough to make a decision she should have admitted so. If she wasn't in a position to make a decision, she should have advised people that the safest thing to do was leave town.
Someone in her position of Authority should well recognise that people, no matter what their socio-economic demographic are not stupid to being lied to, and do not appreciated being treated as such.

- Dr Lester regularly stated this was a unique situation of moderate term exposure to which there are no precedents, and the risks were unknown.
  A similar scenario would be the exposure of a Melbourne suburb to the spill of fracking chemicals used in coal seam gas extraction. The entire ingredient list of these chemicals is kept secret by the companies using them, however it is known some are damaging to human health.
  In either scenario the Government health department may not have evidence of short or medium health effects, but should act on the precautionary principle and enact evacuation measures for the local populace.

- Individuals were reporting ill-health effects but the importance of these was being glossed over.
  Signs and symptoms experienced by my immediate family included;
  - stinging eyes,
  - breathlessness (in the absence of other respiratory conditions)
  - burning throat
  - eczema type rashes
  - headaches
  - nauseas type sick feeling
  - blood nose
  - dizziness
  - coughing of chemical tasting sputum after leaving town.

  These symptoms were experienced even though our family's presence in Morwell was limited by attending to the requirements of a death in the family and self-evacuation. Any time spent in the acrid smoke resulted in signs of exposure to a substance which was causing detrimental effects to health.

  Should the manufacturer of a commercial product of any kind find their product was causing these type of effects in consumers one of two things would occur. The product would be removed from sale and recalled immediately, or the product would be issued with extensive warning labels and instructions for use.

The Victorian Government did not see fit to respond to these serious signs and symptoms.
I would like an explanation as to why this was so.

- I purchased protective face masks for my family BEFORE the Government made issue of any similar item available to the public. These were charcoal filter based and for small particle and gases. My purchase was made on Monday 17th February at a local workwear and safety outlet in consultation with staff there and considering the needs of my family.
  Advice I was given included the best and worst items of protection, and information on the length of time individual items could be used before their protective properties expired.

  Local charities and the Local Government issued masks which were not suited to the situation. They did not issue enough masks for the duration of the situation, and did not explain the level of protection these offered.

  I would like to know why I had to purchase masks to protect my family before the authorities issued such an item?
  I would also like to know why masks which were substandard for the situation were issued?

Additional points I do not have time to elaborate on include:

<u>The administration of the Governments relocation and clean up packages has been poorly thought out, and are I believe discriminatory.</u>
My husband and I work – we were ineligible for any financial assistance to relocate, yet our relocation to family in Tanjil South tripled our fuel bills. We have had no financial compensation at all.
Additionally I think a bucket for clean-up is a pathetic insult.
I already own plenty of buckets and should not have to spend my precious time cleaning up mess caused by someone else's laziness.
Enough said on the pathetic joke which is 'assistance'.

<u>The Education Department took over a week to devise a plan of action to remove vulnerable children from smoke exposure.</u> I phoned the education department Monday 17th to enquire about relocation of school children attending Commercial Road Primary School. The answers I was give were evasive and amounted to 'we are following the advice of the EPA and Health Department. I was additionally told 'we will not be bussing children around the countryside', and there is no reason for children to stay away from school as education is important. So is health.

Ok to enforce a lock out of Town on Sunday though family prepared to fight fire, yet Government unable/willing to evacuate from ongoing noxious smoke.

Damage to my garden via neglect – seed savers plants dying and damaged.

Insulation removed and replaced at childcare/school where son is only there 6.5 hours a day. Insulation at home – nada – lives here permanently.

Cost of relocation – v cost of lost income or job at work

Lost home value

Second class tx of citizens.

Respons in Melbourne – Toorak, cbd etc?