

# Reports of deaths in the Latrobe Valley related to the Hazelwood coal mine fire

17 September 2014

In February and March 2014, a large fire burned for 45 days in the Hazelwood coal mine in Morwell. Smoke and ash affected air quality in Morwell as well as other areas of the Latrobe Valley.

Community concern about health impacts from the smoke was high and will be the subject of a long term health study commissioned by the Department of Health.

Recent media reports suggesting the mine fire may have contributed to eleven deaths earlier this year have again raised residents' concern about the impact the mine fire has had on their health.

Local communities have worked hard to recover and rebuild after this fire. Health issues can quickly raise anxiety so it is important that any information provided is accurate and well understood.

This fact sheet provides data on the Latrobe Valley and explains how these figures were gathered, analysed and reported.

## What information has the Department gathered about deaths in the Latrobe Valley?

Births, Deaths and Marriages Victoria (BDM Victoria) was asked to provide information about the number of people who have died in the Latrobe Valley for several periods:

- the time of the fire (February – March 2014)
- the first six months of 2014;
- the same periods for the past five years (2009 to 2013).

The postcodes included were:

- Morwell (3840)
- Traralgon (3844)
- Churchill (3842)
- Moe (3825).

## What did the data tell us?

It's important to note that reporting deaths in percentages can sometimes sound alarming when the size of the population is small. For example if ten people out of 100 die, that's 10 per cent of the population. However if ten people out of 1 million die, the same number died, and while very difficult for those impacted by those deaths, the percentage is far lower.

As the populations of the four postcodes are all relatively small, even the smallest change can appear very high when it is well within normal ranges.

### Morwell

The highest exposure of fine particles from the smoke was in Morwell, especially in the southern part of Morwell. Therefore, if the mine fire had any impact on the number of deaths, it would be expected to be seen in Morwell,

**However, for February and March 2014, there was a 19 per cent decrease of deaths compared to the same period in the previous five years.**

For the six month period, the number of deaths (88) was similar to 2012 (89), 2010 (91) and 2009 (86).

### Traralgon

There was an increase in deaths during February and March but the number (43) was similar to 2009 (41).

For the whole period (January to June 2014) there was an increase in deaths, with again the 2014 figure (109) being similar to the 2009 figure (117).

### Churchill

The actual numbers were very small which was then reflected in an increase of 25 per cent for February and March 2014 but a decrease the other way of minus 32 per cent for the six month period.

## Moe

There were increases of 32 per cent and 33 per cent in the deaths for these two time periods. The Department is obtaining additional data to better understand this issue.

## The impact of heatwaves

Across all four postcodes, for March 2014, the total number of deaths was 62, which was a 21% increase above the previous five year average.

**These 62 deaths were equal to the number for the same postcode group in 2009, the period of the last heatwave year in Victoria.**

Heat, particularly sustained high temperatures can cause increased number of deaths in the most vulnerable people, such as older people, and those with some chronic medical conditions.

In January 2014, Victoria experienced the third hottest summer on record. In addition, the weekend of the 8 and 9 of February were extreme heat conditions.

## How are deaths reported?

There are many factors that can influence the overall number of deaths in any geographic area. This includes those related to individuals - such as their age, sex and underlying health.

It can also be influenced by external factors - such as a heatwave or other issues such as influenza seasons or accidents.

Births, Deaths and Marriages Victoria (BDM Victoria) keep permanent records of all births, adoptions, marriages and deaths in the state of Victoria.

They collect and provide statistics including the number of deaths per postcode in Victoria each year.

## What does this mean for our long term health?

As Morwell was directly impacted by the smoke, health effects caused by the mine fire would be expected to be seen in this population. During the time when the fire occurred, there was no increase in the number of deaths in Morwell.

However, in recognition of community concern and to answer questions about long term health impacts, the Department of Health is commissioning a long term health study.

The Department is also seeking further expert advice in relation to this issue and will release this as soon as it is available.

## Where can I get more information?

⊗ For more information about health issues go to: [www.health.vic.gov.au/hazelwood](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/hazelwood)

⊗ For information about Births, Deaths and Marriages Victoria go to: <http://www.bdm.vic.gov.au/> or call 1300 369 367 between 8.30am and 4.30am weekdays

For any concerns about your health, see your doctor or call Nurse-On-Call on 1300 60 60 24.

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