Wood heater smoke is not safe

While we all love the warmth and nostalgia that an open fire brings, the reality is that the smoke it produces damages our health. This is why scientists are urging us to remove wood heaters in our homes and replace them with cleaner heating options such as reverse cycle air conditioning.

In a newly released factsheet from the Centre for Air pollution, energy and health Research (CAR), scientists have outlined how smoke from wood heaters affects health and what can be done about it.

Professor Fay Johnston, Chief Investigator of CAR and Professor of Environmental Health at the University of Tasmania’s Menzies Institute for Medical Research explains the dangers:

“Many people believe that because wood smoke is ‘natural’, it’s less harmful to health than pollution produced by traffic or industry. This is not the case. Smoke emitted by burning wood is composed of toxins, carcinogens, and large amounts of particulate matter (PM2.5).”

“PM2.5 can affect all systems of the body, and exposure is linked to the development or worsening of heart disease, lung diseases, diabetes, and changes in brain function. It also affects children and pregnant people.”

Wood heater smoke is often framed as a problem only affecting people in rural and regional Australia. However, Professor Johnston says it’s a problem that directly affects people living in major cities.

“In Sydney and Melbourne, wood heater smoke contributes to more PM2.5 air pollution than traffic or industry even though wood heating is only used by about 5 percent of households. This comes as a shock to most people.”

Professor Johnston says that since regulation of wood smoke pollution lies with local councils, working with them is a key strategy to minimise the health impacts that wood heaters pose.

“We are currently undertaking a project looking into practical interventions that local governments can put in place to reduce wood smoke pollution. Small improvements in air quality translate into large improvements in community health.”

While it has been acknowledged that wood heater smoke is a problem Australia-wide, there is currently no formal national policy in place to address the issue.

CAR researchers are calling on governments to introduce a subsidy scheme to allow Australians under increasing cost-of-living pressures to make the switch from wood heaters to reverse cycle air conditioning, including those in rentals.

Professor Johnston says “Any subsidy should cover the upfront costs of installation of reverse cycle air conditioning. This would remove the financial obstacles for families who want to make the change to a heater option that improves the health of their family and their community. It also allows people to have access to proper cooling in the summer months.”

For local governments (Australia wide), researchers and policy-makers who would like more information on Professor Johnston’s project, please contact Morgan Brain on morgan.brain@utas.edu.au

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 *The Centre for Air pollution, energy and health Research (CAR) is an NHMRC Centre of Research Excellence that brings together experts studying the links between air pollution, energy transitions and our health. We are a virtual centre and are based in most Australian capital cities. Our researchers are at the cutting edge of science and come from a variety of*

*fields. Our vision is for a healthier community through cleaner air and cleaner energy sources.*

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