

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL
Question on notice

Thursday, 13 March 2014

882. Hon Robin Chappie to the Parliamentary Secretary representing the Minister for Health.

Regarding the testing for heavy metal accumulation in blood and tissue of long-term residents near Alcoa refineries and residue drying area (mudlakes) in Wagerup and Yarloop, I ask:

- (a) has the Minister, or the Department of Health, ever been asked by local residents, who live near the refineries, to conduct medical blood or tissue testing;
- (b) have residents been offered medical testing to identify what heavy metal concentration their bodies hold;
- (c) if no to (b), why not;
- (d) what baseline health data is used by the Minister, or the Department of Health, to monitor heavy metal concentration in residents near the refineries, especially in light of the licensed extension of production;
- (e) if no such baseline data is currently available, when will the Department of Health collect such data;
- (f) have water tanks in the area been tested regarding heavy metal content and concentration in the water;
- (g) if no to (f), why not;
- (h) given that groundwater extraction is not permitted around the refineries, do similar restrictions exist regarding the use of water tanks:
- (i) if yes to (h), why; and
- (ii) if no to (h), why not;
- (i) how does the Department of Health monitor the health of the residents around the Alcoa plants;
- (j) if the Department of Health does not monitor the health of residents around the Alcoa plants, why not;
- (k) why have the residents in Esperance being tested for heavy metal, but not in Yarloop and surrounding communities;
- (l) what is the Minister's advice to residents regarding sleep deprivation due to noise from both the rail traffic in the Yarloop rail corridor and Wagerup refinery, outside of the Alcoa Area A and its long term impact on human health; and
- (m) what testing or assistance has been offered to residents who have reported the impact of sleep deprivation due to rail and refinery noise emissions in Yarloop?

Answer

(a) Yes. One person suffering from multiple chemical sensitivity requested testing who was subsequently referred to a clinical toxicologist for further assessment.

(b-c) Heavy metal testing was not offered to any residents because environmental monitoring for heavy metals undertaken by the then Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) met the recommended health based guidelines. Heavy metal testing is only considered

appropriate for assessing potential exposure to specific air borne emissions when environmental monitoring identifies a level of concern and the metal concerned can be measured and linked to an exposure event.

(d) Testing people for heavy metal is not required when environmental monitoring for heavy metals meets the recommended health based guidelines.

(e) There is no proposal to collect such data.

(f) The Department of Health (DOH) does not routinely test water tanks for heavy metal content in the nominated areas as per (d) because recommended levels are met.

(g) The 2009 Department of Environment Regulation Report on air quality and emissions confirms that heavy metal contamination has not been demonstrated in this area (DEC – *Wagerup 2009 Air Quality Study* published in 2011). DOH is not aware of any further testing.

(h)(i-ii) The DOH has no legislation or other mechanisms available to it to restrict use of water or manage water tanks installed by residents.

(i) Systems to routinely monitor the health of residents are not considered necessary around Alcoa's plants. The DOH would act only on an individual complaint or inquiry.

(j) Environmental monitoring showed no heavy metal contamination. Therefore systems to monitor the health of residents beyond the normal population-based health monitoring programs were not considered necessary. Any complaints are investigated on an individual case.

(k) Esperance residents were exposed to fugitive lead carbonate dust escaping from the Esperance Port which had little or no pollution control measures in place to prevent lead dust contaminating the town. Residents were only tested after environmental monitoring confirmed the lead levels were above the recommended health guidelines.

(l) The Alcoa operating licence contains conditions based on State Planning Policies and Environmental Protection Regulations in relation to noise emissions. Public health risks are taken into consideration when those standards are met.

(m) No testing for sleep deprivation related to noise levels has been offered to residents in Yarloop and none is planned.