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Burn-off smoke can harm health, says expert

Media Release:

Smoke pollution from the burning off underway in Tasmania could affect vulnerable people's health more than exhaust fumes, a University of Tasmania researcher has warned.

Dr Fay Johnston, a respiratory health researcher from the Menzies Institute, an institute of UTAS, this year began a four-year research project comparing the health effects of air pollution from deliberate burn-offs, bushfires and wood heaters and is critical that health is largely missing from the debate on the issue.

"There is preliminary evidence that that woodsmoke could be worse for people's health than car exhaust pollution," she said.

"I believe we need to ask whether more stringent rules around burn-offs are necessary simply because of the health effects."

Dr Johnston and Professor David Bowman from the School of Plant Science have been granted \$440,000 by the Australian Research Council to examine the health effects of woodsmoke.

Looking at the effects of wood heaters in nine Australian towns, including Launceston, and the effects of deliberate burns in Hobart, Sydney and Perth, the pair will build on research they completed in Darwin in 2002.

"We found a positive statistical association between smoke pollution at levels below accepted Australian air quality standards and admissions to hospital for asthma," Dr Johnston said.

"All six Australian studies that have been done show that at a lower smoke pollution level there are increased asthma levels - but at higher levels there are increased hospital admissions and increased deaths."

Dr Johnston said Launceston had done well in reducing pollution from wood heaters; the effect had been correspondingly fewer health problems caused by smoke pollution.

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