

Senator Rachel Siewert
Chair, Standing Committee on Community Affairs (References Committee)
Parliament House, ACT 2600

By email *community.affairs.sen@aph.gov.au*

Dear Senator Siewert,

SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO IMPACTS ON HEALTH OF AIR QUALITY IN AUSTRALIA

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry. I live in an inner suburb of Melbourne and have had an ongoing problem with wood smoke from two immediate neighbours. My two neighbours who live to my south, both use wood heaters as their sole source of heating. I live in a weatherboard house and my neighbour's house is only a few metres away.

When I first became aware of the wood smoke from our neighbours eight years ago I tried talking to my neighbours about the issue. My neighbours responded that wood smoke was not harmful and did not see the need to change their practices. I next approached my local council. A council officer came and spoke with both my neighbours and instructed them in correct operation of their wood heaters. But as the months passed, the levels of smoke continued just the same. The smoke from my neighbour's house often begins around 8am, and the fire can be relit a number of times during the day and evening. If it is a still winter day, the smoke sits like a fog around our house.

I have two children, 5 years and 8 years. Both my children have developed asthma and one of my children (8 years) has had a number of respiratory problems which has resulted in five operations (grommets x 3, adenoids, tonsils). The poor night time breathing of our eldest child has been very concerning at times. It has involved countless doctors and specialist appointments and overnight monitoring of her breathing. She has three burst ear drums from repeat ear infections. The asthma has also restricted their participation in sport. I can't know if the smoke exposure has caused their respiratory issues but I am certain that it exacerbates it. When we tuck them in their beds at night their rooms often smell of wood smoke.

Following my initial contact with my local council in 2007 another council officer was sent out. This officer again instructed my immediate neighbour in correct operation. The council advised me that if the wood smoke continued they could issue an abatement notice. However my neighbour often re-lights his wood heater at 11pm at night then reduces the air to the fire, so that it smoulders overnight. The council are not available after hours. One officer did agree to try and use the abatement system. He suggested I call him every time my neighbour's chimney started smoking. However the officer was difficult to contact and often took hours to arrive (by which time the smoke had abated). Additionally the council changed their definition of excessive smoke during the course of dealing with them. Initially they said that if the chimney emitted thick smoke for more than 15 minutes to call them out. This time limit expanded to 20 minutes, 30 minutes, to 45 minutes.

I arranged to meet with the chief environmental officer of the council to try and get further assistance. I explained that because my neighbours don't believe there are health problems associated with wood smoke they couldn't see the justification for reducing the smoke. I asked if the environmental officers could explain the health effects of wood smoke to my neighbours. The chief officer explained that this was not their role and that they were not instructed by the Victorian EPA to do this – instead their function was solely about correct operation of wood heaters.

The council was not able to help any further, and unfortunately the chief environmental officer took offence at what he considered my criticism of their response, and became defensive and difficult. I stopped requesting their involvement. I got the impression that they would have marked this down as another 'case solved' in their reporting on the issue. The Council have no 'next step' when the education fails to result in correct operation. They simply repeat the same response. In a situation where a wood heater operator is not concerned about wood smoke pollution (such as both my neighbours), and do not believe that wood smoke is in any way harmful, education as a strategy has minimal impact. All that the Council was achieving in my case was to aggravate my neighbours and erode any good will I had built up with them to encourage them to voluntarily change their habits.

(c) the standards, monitoring and regulation of air quality at all levels of government;

In Victoria local council enforcement officers are empowered through EPA regulations to respond to local complaints of wood heater smoke pollution. Unfortunately because the issue is not given any priority by the EPA in Victoria, the council officer are generally the least experienced, most junior staff, with little or no training in effectively dealing with neighbourhood issues. They have the power to issue abatement notices, but according to my local council this has never occurred in Victoria.

Education alone is ineffective. It must be backed up with a properly supported penalty system for incorrect operation. The workforce that implements this system must be well trained, skilled and empowered to effectively deal with the issue. I don't believe that the Victorian system is adequately supported by their workforce or their penalty system.

So having aggravated neighbourly relationships on many occasions – I took the step in 2008 of writing to the Minister for the Environment and Climate Change, who was then Gavin Jennings (Victoria). As a result of my letter a meeting was organised with the Environment Protection Authority (EPA) in Victoria.

I met with two EPA policy officers who acknowledged that wood smoke pollution was a concern but glibly informed me that there was nothing that they could do. According to the EPA officers the government is not interested in the issue and as they said 'given the general public indifference' it is unlikely that there would be any pressure to review the current approach to wood smoke. They suggested that if they were in my situation they would move house.

Over the past eight year I have written to many Ministers, made numerous submissions, met with local councillors, met with the local members of parliament, and even consulted a lawyer to see if there were any legal avenues. I wrote to the Cancer Council and Vic Health. At some expense we sealed up our house as best we can with an old weatherboard house and we paid out a large sum of money for an air filter. We also seriously considered whether to sell up and move. Aside from the fact that my children have many friends on the street, that we are a five minute walk to school and aside from the expense of selling, buying and moving – we realised that there was no guarantee that a new neighbour wouldn't also have a wood heater or decide to install one.

I have organised and paid for our neighbour's chimney flue to be cleaned. I have organised to have the height of his flue extended – again at our cost. I appreciate that he has stopped allowing the fire to smoulder overnight, no doubt worn down by my knocking on his door late at night, for many months asking him to increase the air to the fire. I believe that my neighbour's wood heater and operation of his heater (with the exception of the overnight smouldering) complies with the current Australian standards. Unfortunately this is little comfort when we live with ongoing exposure to wood smoke. Frankly I'd much prefer clean air. It is also stressful to have to be in the position of tackling my

neighbour about the issue and having to monitor the smoke from his chimney less he lapse in his operation of his wood heater. The equivalent situation would be if managed tobacco smoking in restaurants by simply relying on smokers to be considerate. And if there was the odd smoker who puffed away a little too much, we then put the onus on non-smokers to complain if they don't like it.

We rarely use our back yard in winter and even with the doors and windows shut it is common to smell smoke in our house. Our front door is set back in a little alcove and faces the side of our neighbour's house, so entering and exiting our house means breathing in considerable amounts of wood smoke. The smoke settles around our doorway and along the side of our house. We enter or exit our house up to seven or eight times a day (with going to school, work, children's play dates, activities, friends visiting etc) so it is difficult to avoid exposure.

I appreciate that some people use wood heaters because they believe it reduces fuel costs (though from what I have read this is debateable). Both my neighbours source their wood from railroad sleepers, rather than paying a larger sum for clean, dry firewood. It hardly seems fair that our lung health must come second to our neighbour's financial decisions. The research I've read suggests that wood smoke affects the lung development of children, and is particularly of concern for people doing outside exercise, as they can breathe the particles deep into their lungs.

I think the low public awareness about the health impacts of wood smoke pollution plays a major role in being able to address the issue. People have a right to know. They have a right to know they could be damaging their children's health by using a wood heater, that they could be exacerbating their own health problems and that they could be contributing to health problems in their neighbourhood. There needs to be a broader education campaign to ensure the health issues associated with wood smoke becomes general knowledge.

(b) those populations most at risk and the causes that put those populations at risk;

I ask the senate committee to consider the plight of direct and near neighbours of households who use wood heaters as their sole source of heating. I believe that my situation is far from isolated and is repeated many thousands of times over around the country. Many people don't know who to go to, or that anything can be done. Or they go to their local council and find the response inadequate. They attempt to seal up their homes, they buy air filters, or they end up having to move. Or like me they make submissions to government enquiries. Or perhaps they assume like many people that the smoke is harmless because it comes from a natural source. So they simply live with it, unaware of the potential long term damage to their health.

My children should have the right to clean air in their own home. Even at their school I have noticed a house close by with a wood heater that blows smoke over the playground where the children run around and play. Attempting to deal with the smoke from our neighbour's wood heater has caused us considerable stress. It has aggravated relations with my two neighbours and has cost us a great deal of money and time. But worst of all it has had a detrimental impact on our children's health. I find it very distressing to feel so powerless to protect my children's lung health. In addition I have learnt not to talk to people about the issue. Because the health impacts of wood smoke is not general knowledge people are quick to think you must be a 'health nut', or an over anxious parent. I have approached all the authorities, but have found that the options available to reduce the risk of particle pollution from wood heaters for myself and my children are totally inadequate.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.
Melbourne, Victoria.