

Climate change and health in the Loddon Mallee: understanding the impact on three diverse groups

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“It doesn’t feel like acceptance, more like surrender.”

Background

Climate change has been identified as one of the biggest threats to human health. This has been acknowledged at international, national, state and local levels in varying ways.

The impact on health is disproportionate depending on location and the unique characteristics of varying population groups.

Priority population groups have been identified within national climate change initiatives. While this has been reflected in local strategies, there is very little data available to describe the impact on rural and regional communities. Rural communities have been identified as vulnerable to the impact of climate change, amplifying its impact.

A research agreement between Violet Vines Marshman Centre for Rural Health Research and the Loddon Mallee Public Health Unit (LMPHU) was established to explore the impact of climate change on the health of priority population groups within the Loddon Mallee region.

This included older people, people with neurodiversity and culturally and linguistically diverse population groups throughout the region.

The project aimed to generate place-based data relevant to regional conditions.

The study explored perceptions and experiences of climate change and its impact on health.

Method

Data collection followed a descriptive qualitative research methodology and included use of interactive workshops and individual interviews. Workshops and interviews focused on perceptions and experiences of climate change and included topics such as: where information is obtained, personal experiences, health impacts and thoughts for the future.

Data was thematically analysed to generate findings and recommendations for next steps.

Interactive workshops were held with the following population groups:

- Young neurodiverse people aged 18-24 in Bendigo.
- Culturally and linguistically diverse people aged 18+ in Robinvale.
- Older people aged 55+ in Charlton.

Service providers for each of the above groups were identified and individual interviews conducted following the completion of each workshop. This provided a service provider perspective of the impact of climate change on the health of each population group.

Service providers included: Different Journeys in Bendigo; Our Place in Robinvale; East Wimmera Health Service in Charlton.

Recruitment processes were initiated through collaboration with the Loddon Mallee Public Health Unit. The assistance of Mildura- based LMPHU staff was integral to the conduct of the Robinvale workshop.

Findings

While each group and location had unique characteristics, findings showed many common concerns. Analysis revealed the following themes common to all population groups: mistrust of information, health impact, sustainability, housing efficiency and power security.

Mistrust of information

Each population group had concerns about the accuracy and truth of information received regarding climate change. Very few sources were considered credible, particularly those in the media. While sources of information varied, each group felt more confident that local information could be trusted, and some relied on personal experience and word of mouth.

Health Impact

The impact of climate change on mental health was strikingly prominent. Anxiety regarding climate change was common in all groups. A sense of powerlessness had varying impact, but for some it resulted in fear for livelihoods and future sustainability. Other direct health impacts discussed included: allergy/asthma, heat exposure, skin cancer, mosquitoes.

Sustainability

Each group expressed concerns that efforts to recycle/reuse resources were not effective and that individual efforts had little meaning. There was clear resolve that more needed to be done at local levels and that this may help address a felt sense of powerlessness.

Housing Efficiency and Power Security

A lack of efficiency of existing housing to cope with both heat and cold was described. While the type of housing and occupancy varied greatly between groups, a concern for the cost of heating and cooling was clearly expressed. So too a concern that existing sources of power were not secure or sustainable in the longer term.

Points of difference were generally derived from population characteristics. They were based on sensory perception and neurodiversity, access and use of technology, age-based perspectives, access and use of information, levels of experience of extreme weather events, socio-economic and educational status.

Service provider interviews generally supported and expanded upon the experiences of the population groups. They confirmed the challenges of the population group regarding expense, affordability and capacity for domestic mitigation of impact, information processing, help-seeking behaviours and vulnerability.

Recommendations

This study provides preliminary data that is unique due to the inclusion of diverse population groups and focus on experience-based perceptions. The following recommendations are made:

- Further research with one or more of the above population groups to gain a greater understanding of impact and co-design of place-based solutions.
- Localised action to determine appropriate and achievable solutions to recycling/reuse of materials and dissemination of information.
- Localised action to determine appropriate and achievable solutions to domestic thermal efficiency and power security.

The project team

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