

Dr John Drinan  
Chair  
Singleton Shire Healthy Environment Group

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Dear Dr Drinan

I am writing to follow up on the recent meeting you had with Hunter New England Population Health Unit (HNE PHU). I am informed by Professor Durrheim and Dr Dalton that a number of issues were discussed in relation to the Singleton Shire Healthy Environment Group (SSHEG) document entitled *Air Pollution Health Study Review*. A summary of these discussions are provided below.

#### Blasting processes

It was indicated that Dr Neville Hodgkinson had identified a process that he believed would significantly reduce blast fumes. He was encouraged by HNE PHU to contact NSW Environment Protection Authority (EPA) and NSW Department of Planning and Environment (DPE) who have a regulatory roles, technical expertise and influence with regard to mines and their operation.

#### Near neighbours/families and occupational limits

The document suggested that occupational limits for workers were more protective than ambient air level standards. HNE PHU advised that usually it was the reverse. Workplace limits are usually higher than those set for the community. Community limits need to factor in the extended duration of exposure (e.g. 24 hours/ seven days a week.), plus potentially sensitive people who are not usually represented in the workforce (e.g. children and the elderly).

With regard to the proposal for setting standards in the community for NO<sub>x</sub> fumes from mine blasts, this would be a backward step as the goal should be to avoid any community exposure to blast fumes. These events are actually pollution events regulated by the EPA under the *Protection of the Environment Operations Act 1997* (POEO Act) and should be reported to EPA for investigation.

#### Role of EPA

The specific role of the EPA in protecting health in addition to the environment was discussed and highlighted in their Act. I am informed that a copy of the POEO Act was forwarded to SSHEG after the meeting.

### Monitoring of community health

While monitoring of community health outcomes to detect health impacts from mines has an intuitive appeal, it is unlikely to be useful in this situation. To provide valid scientific information such a study would require a sample size which likely exceeds the total population in the community.


The health effects of air pollution are already well understood, therefore a more useful approach is to monitoring environmental exposures. The role of the Upper Hunter Air Quality Monitoring Network to achieve this monitoring was emphasised.

### Buffer Zones

When NSW Health reviews environmental impact assessments we seek to determine the potential health impact on members of the community living close to mines and provide advice to DPE. Ultimately the acceptable distance between mines and residences is determined through the planning process and may result in either dust controls at mines or residences, or acquisition of impacted properties. Should you wish to pursue your views on establishing buffer zones it would be worthwhile discussing this further with the DPE.

### Health risk assessments

Health risk assessments are becoming increasingly expected in environmental assessments. Where these are provided, NSW Health reviews them and provides comment.

I trust that the meeting with HNE PHU was useful to SSHEG. As many of the issues of concern to SSHEG are under the influence or regulation of the DPE, I would encourage you to engage directly with them on a regular basis. Should you wish to discuss this matter further with NSW Health, please contact Professor Durrheim on 4924 6395 

Yours sincerely



Dr Kerry Chant  
**Chief Health Officer and Deputy Secretary**  
**Population and Public Health**

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