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Lead risk for Mt Isa kids

Ian Gerard | December 12, 2006

CHILDREN in the Queensland mining capital of Mount Isa could be at risk of delayed brain development and reduced IQ levels after testing for lead poisoning in the town found 10 per cent of kids had readings above the level recommended by the World Health Organisation.

State health authorities are examining nine households after testing of 95 children aged between one and four showed three had blood-lead levels greater than 15 micrograms per decilitre, and six recorded levels above 10 micrograms.

While Queensland Health's notifiable level is 15 micrograms, the World Health Organisation currently recommends that children have a blood lead level no greater than 10.

High lead levels in young children can alter brain function, delay neurodevelopment, decrease IQ levels and slow cognitive function, and lead to behavioural problems.

The testing began in September after a report in The Australian raised concerns about the possibility of lead poisoning of children in the western Queensland town. Queensland Health wants to test 400 children.

A senior manager at the state's Environment Protection Agency said political considerations had stopped the introduction of air-quality monitoring and mandatory community health checks at Mt Isa's two smelters - the largest source of lead emissions in Australia. The average reading of children tested so far has been four micrograms a decilitre.

Tropical Population Health Unit environmental health services director John Piispanen said the results were not cause for alarm but were a warning to parents to stay vigilant about lead exposure.

"A high blood-lead level, it really should sound some sort of warning to parents," he said.

Health authorities are yet to find a trigger for the elevated readings, and there is nothing yet linking the nine children who have tested positive.

"We are undertaking our detailed environmental audits at the moment as to why these kids have this blood level, and the information that is coming back shows these children have spent time during the day under the house playing in the dirt," Mr Piispanen said.

"There is no spatial or geographical relationship to these - they don't live in the same street and have nothing in common."

Mount Isa's huge copper and lead smelters, which sit in the middle of the town's skyline, are owned by mining company Xstrata and released 290 tonnes of lead into the air in 2004-05.

Mount Isa Mayor Ron McCullough said the community would not be panicked by the results, but he urged parents to have their children tested as soon as possible.

"I don't think there will be any alarm through the city, but people will want to know what the reason for it is," he said.

"It's early days - let's determine why the levels are at that height, find out whether it's because of the natural land of the area or because they have picked it up somewhere else."

Queensland Health now plans to launch a public health campaign, aimed at reducing the chances of lead poisoning, that will provide practical advice to parents, such as the importance of washing children's faces and hands before they go to sleep.

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