

A coal economy has multiple health and social risks, says major review

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A major review of evidence on the impact of coal mining has highlighted serious, ongoing health and social problems and an urgent need for improvements in government coal mining policy.

The research by the University of Sydney has also revealed a critical lack of local studies investigating the effect [coal mining](#) has on Australian communities.

The report, which analyses 50 peer-reviewed research papers from 10 countries, will be launched at the University today.

"This comprehensive review of Australian and international [health](#) and medical literature underlines the pressing need for Australia to re-evaluate whether the overall health and social costs of Australia's reliance on a coal economy will ultimately outweigh its [economic benefits](#)," said lead author Associate Professor Ruth Colagiuri, from Sydney Medical School.

The purpose of the report (PDF, 1.8MB), commissioned by Beyond [Zero Emissions](#), is to provide an overview of the available evidence on the health effects and social justice impacts of coal mining on local communities and relate these issues to the Hunter Region of New South Wales. The Hunter region has more than 30 mostly open-cut coal mines and six active coal-fired power stations.

Studies from coal mining regions of the US, the United Kingdom,

Canada, Turkey, Israel, and Asia indicate serious health impacts for communities living near coal mines and coal combusting power stations.

"Among the problems identified in children and infants in these communities are impaired growth and [neurological development](#), high blood levels of [heavy metals](#), higher prevalences of any birth defects and a greater chance of being of low birth weight, which is a risk factor for future obesity, diabetes and heart disease," Associate Professor Colagiuri said.

Adults have been shown to have higher rates of death from lung cancer and chronic heart, respiratory and kidney diseases. They also have increased chances of developing other cancers and hypertension. Some studies also show higher rates of miscarriages and stillbirths.

"Although there are differences in mining practices and standards across countries that may account for some of this excess death and illness, it is hard to imagine that at least some of this evidence would not apply to Australia," Professor Colagiuri said.

Studies from the US, the UK, Russia and Queensland found social injustices associated with coal mining such as environmental degradation, including water pollution and slurry spills. Also identified were the inability of communities to grasp financial benefits and the distortion of the local economy and infrastructure, including labour and accommodation shortages and increased pressure on local emergency services.

Studies of social impacts in the Hunter Region acknowledge similar issues.

"Communities in the Hunter report feelings of powerlessness and distress and have no formal avenue for input into the granting of mining

licences," Professor Colagiuri said.

"The available international and local evidence about the health and social harms of living near coal mines or [coal fired power](#) stations highlights the need for an urgent policy response to ensure transparency in arrangements between government and the mining industry and community safeguards such as mandatory health impact assessments.

"We also urgently need well designed local studies from Australia's coal areas to generate evidence for the most informed decision possible about the future health of mining communities. The negative impacts we have identified have implications not only for this generation but future ones," Professor Colagiuri said.

More information: [media.beyondzeroemissions.org/ ... lth_Report_FINAL.pdf](#)

Provided by University of Sydney

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