



Secretary

Department of Health & Human Services

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Cheryl Vella
Coroners Registrar
Coroners Court of Victoria
66 Kavanagh Street
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Dear Ms Vella

Thank you for your letter of 8 September 2015 regarding the findings of State Coroner Phillip Byrne into the deaths of Katrina Baron and Christopher Dokos. Please accept my apologies for the delay in replying. 2014 0431 2014 0430

As a result of his investigation of these tragic deaths, Coroner Byrne recommended to the Department of Health and Human Services that:

The Chief Psychiatrist issue a directive requiring all public mental health services to develop and introduce an appropriate guideline that identifies, among other things, the clinical responsibilities for case-managed and at risk clients at times of extreme weather conditions".

Response

The Chief Psychiatrist is in the processing of issuing a Clinical Practice Advisory Notice to all Victorian mental health services requiring them to develop and implement a plan to train and support staff in the identification of highly vulnerable mental health consumers and the preparation, with consumers and carers, of individual heat health plans.

A copy of this notice is attached for your information.

If you require further information about this work please contact Daniel O'Connor, Deputy Chief Psychiatrist, on 9096 7571.

Yours sincerely


Kym Peake
Secretary
417/2016

Encl: Clinical Practice Advisory Notice – Heat health plans for vulnerable mental health consumers

Heat health plans for vulnerable mental health consumers

Chief Psychiatrist's Clinical Practice Advisory Notice
24 June 2016

In early 2014, a middle-aged couple died at home of heat stroke on a day when the outside temperature had reached 44°C. Both members of the couple were consumers of their local area mental health service and were taking antipsychotic medication.

More recently, a middle-aged man who was taking antipsychotic medication died while walking some distance from his home to an inpatient unit in temperatures of 38°C.

As a result of these tragic incidents, the Coroner has directed me to require all mental health services to develop a suitable plan to support vulnerable mental health consumers at times of extreme weather conditions. To maximise their value, these plans should also make reference to responses to other emergency situations.

Services that have not done so already should develop policies and procedures relevant to their consumer groups and localities, with appropriate allocation of responsibilities.

This advisory note should be read in conjunction with *Emergency Preparedness Policy for Clients and Services*.¹

Background

During the 2014 heatwave there was a:

- 25 per cent increase in Ambulance Victoria's emergency caseload
- 56 per cent increase in after-hours medical consultations
- 7 per cent increase in emergency department presentations
- 24 per cent increase in mortality with an estimated 167 excess deaths.²

The risk of heat-related illness and death is elevated by:

- older age
- a mental illness or cognitive deficit that makes it difficult for people to make and execute plans
- the effect of antipsychotic medications on the body's ability to regulate temperature³
- medications that can have toxic side effects in conditions of dehydration (for example, lithium carbonate)
- medical conditions such as diabetes, cardiac disease or renal impairment
- physical disability
- pregnancy.

People are at further risk if they:

- live in areas prone to bush fires
- lack air-conditioning or prefer not to use it
- have no home
- live on the upper floor of a multi-storey building
- come from a culturally or linguistically diverse background and cannot access health services or health information
- have limited access to transport.⁴

¹ *Emergency Preparedness Policy for Clients and Services*. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015.

² *Heat Health Plan for Victoria: Protecting Health and Reducing Harm from Extreme Heat and Heatwave*. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015, p20

³ Chong TWH, Castle DJ. Layer upon layer: thermoregulation in schizophrenia. *Schizophrenia Research* 2004, 69, 149-157.

⁴ *Heatwave Planning Guide: Development of Heatwave Plans in Local Councils in Victoria*. Department of Human Services, 2009, p3.