

# Stoking the fires of what is now at stake

Sotiris Vardoulakis,

CANBERRANS have the human right to clean air in their homes, workplaces, schools, playgrounds, and communities.

This statement may sound obvious, but it has been overshadowed by the current political debate on the phase out of wood heaters in the ACT.

But let's take a deep breath first!

The air around us typically carries pollutants emitted from many natural and human sources, such as road vehicles, bushfires, cigarettes, and - importantly for Canberrans - wood heaters.

Domestic wood heaters are indeed the dominant source of air pollution in our city. Only a small proportion of ACT households (around 11 per cent) use wood heaters, predominantly larger households with higher incomes, as found in a nationwide survey.

Despite this, they emit up to 25 per cent of air pollution (PM2.5) in colder years, impacting everyone's health. Our study published in the Medical Journal of Australia indicated that wood heater smoke is associated with 11 to 63 deaths in the ACT every year, with higher numbers of deaths occurring in colder years when wood burning is more prolonged. This impact is comparable to the death toll of road crashes in the capital (11 deaths in 2021 and 18 in 2022). A more comprehensive study on the health impacts of wood heater smoke in Australia published recently broadly confirmed our findings.

Wood smoke exposes Canberrans to carcinogens like those found in tobacco smoke.

Inhaled particles (PM2.5) in wood smoke impact every organ of our body, increasing rates not only of cancer, but also of heart and lung diseases, diabetes, and reproductive, neurological, and immune system disorders.

Exposure to PM2.5 in early life can have a detrimental effect on lung growth.

For children with asthma, wood heater

pollution can even be life-threatening.

Thirty years ago, in December 1995, the ACT was the first Australian jurisdiction to ban smoking in restaurants.

Three years later, it became the first jurisdiction to ban smoking in enclosed areas of pubs. The primary aim of these bans was to protect the public and hospitality workers from the health risks of tobacco smoke.

In August 2023, responding to advice by the ACT Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment and widespread concerns expressed by patient groups, community members and public health experts, the ACT government endorsed the position of

phasing out wood heaters by 2045.

This decision was welcome as a national first that would make Canberra the clean air capital of Australia and enshrined the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment in the Territory's Human Rights Act.

Unfortunately, the clear scientific evidence regarding the health impacts of wood burning and benefits of electrification of domestic heating have since been overshadowed by politicisation and misinformation.

Adverts funded by the wood heating industry have suggested that new "affordable" wood heaters are subject to tighter emission testing and therefore release much small-

er amounts of smoke. However, scientific evidence shows that existing emission standards do not reflect typical household operation or actual wood heater emissions, which are significantly higher than laboratory testing results.

Despite vocal opposition from the wood heating industry and a minority of residents who use wood heaters, it is imperative that the health of the entire ACT community, be prioritised.

|| Professor Sotiris Vardoulakis is the director of HEAL Global Research Centre and a professor of environmental public health at the University of Canberra.



Domestic wood heaters are indeed the dominant source of air pollution in our city. Picture Shutterstock

Canberra Times Opinion  
12 September 2025