

Why Canberra can't afford wood heaters

Devin Bowles

THERE has been recent dispute between Labor and the Greens over whether the government committed to freeing the ACT of wood heaters by 2045.

There are important governance matters, not least of which is whether the media and public can rely on government media releases to be accurate.

All this overlooks the reality that the ACT simply cannot afford the public costs of private wood heaters.

In the ACT, deaths from wood heater smoke probably cost over \$100 million annually. This is because air pollution is one of the largest contributors to excess mortality, and wood heaters are the largest source of air pollution in some Australian cities.

In the context of an ACT government experiencing significant financial strain driven primarily by a health budget that accounts for 30 per cent of overall expenditure, Canberra simply can't afford our current relationship with wood heaters. A recent analysis published in the *Medical Journal of Australia* puts cost of deaths from wood heater smoke pollution at between \$57 million and \$333 million annually.

This doesn't include the costs of people whose health is negatively affected by wood heater smoke who don't die.

This includes people who develop asthma as a result of exposure to air pollution, people who have heart attacks but survive and people who develop pneumonia or COPD. It includes the health impacts on pregnant women and children.

The direct costs to the hospital system, and the indirect costs to the economy, have not been modelled but are undoubtedly significant. With the ACT government's credit rating at risk of being downgraded, it has been unable to afford important measures for our community. At the last budget, it cut the Rent Relief Scheme, which helped keep people out of homelessness.

A question mark now hangs over the future of our library system with unplanned



Greens MLA Laura Nuttall, left, and Environment Minister Suzanne Orr. Pictures by Karleen Minney, Gary Ramage, Shutterstock

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closures and fewer school holiday programs due to staffing issues. It isn't even clear that we'll continue to have a major library in Civic. Yet libraries play a major role in helping communities come together.

Beyond the sheer economics of the ACT's need to get rid of wood heaters is their human toll. Around 40 Canberrans die every year due to wood heater pollution, though the actual number varies considerably between cold years (when people use wood heaters more) and warm years.

In a jurisdiction that often has fewer than 2500 deaths annually, the contribution of wood heaters to overall mortality is important. If you know someone who died in the last few years in Canberra, there is around a 2 per cent chance that wood heater smoke pollution was the cause.

If you worry about an elderly or unwell Canberran you love passing away in the next few years, wood heaters increase their risk in a meaningful way.

The ACT banned cigarette smoking in many public spaces years ago on strong

public health grounds. The ACT government should act urgently to develop and publish an ambitious plan to go smoke-free from wood heaters.

It's no surprise most Canberrans are in favour of a phase out of wood heaters, while only about a quarter are opposed, according to an ACT government YourSay report.

Only about one in nine Canberrans have a wood heater, while almost three times that number report being frequently or sometimes impacted by a neighbour's smoke.

The only reason to question a 2045 target date to remove all smoke heaters is that it is too far away. The cost from smoke-related deaths over the intervening 20 years could exceed \$2 billion. The ACT cannot afford to wait that long.

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