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NEW 'AIR POLLUTION ALERTS' WARN OF HEALTH RISKS

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Research has shown for some time that high levels of air pollution can exacerbate illness. More recently, evidence has emerged about how air pollution at much lower levels can also affect the health of susceptible people, such as those with asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease or coronary artery disease. NSW Health and the Department of Environment and Conservation have started Australia's most comprehensive air quality warning system to ensure residents of Sydney, the Illawarra and the lower Hunter can take action to stay healthy at times of low, medium and high air pollution.

As different patient groups are sensitive to different types of air pollution, the warnings are tailored to draw attention to this – for example, people with asthma can be affected by several pollutants such as ozone and nitrogen dioxide from car exhaust and industry, whilst people with heart disease may be more affected by fine particle pollution.

The air quality alerts are based on information routinely collected by the Department of Environment and Conservation. In Sydney, where routine air pollution forecasting is also in place, an alert will be issued when high air pollution days are forecast. Alerts are distributed to the media and posted on the Department of Environment and Conservation's website. In the Illawarra and lower Hunter high monitored air pollutant levels will trigger the alert system.

The alert predicts the level of risk to sensitive individuals and suggests simple ways to reduce exposure and manage

impacts. Under the new system, people are able to ring a free-call help line for all the latest information on air pollution levels, forecasts and alerts.

It is anticipated that the Air Pollution Health Alerts will be used by primary care providers to help reduce the effects of air pollution on sensitive individuals with chronic disease.¹ The brochures inserted into this edition of the *Bulletin* support this and provide broader advice about reducing the adverse impacts of air pollution.

In much the same way we look at the daily weather forecast and plan our day, the air quality alerts will help sensitive people plan activities around expected air pollution levels and take action to minimise health impacts.

The NSW Department of Health has established a web page with information about the alert system at the following address: www.health.nsw.gov.au/living/airpollution.html. This webpage provides a link to any current air pollution health alerts; information about air quality and health; and information brochures for the general public as well as health professionals.

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