

Lead pollution health impacts on kids still being ignored at Mount Isa

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(PhysOrg.com) -- New research to be published in the editorial section of the *Medical Journal of Australia* on August 2 confirms that the source of elevated environmental lead levels and blood lead levels in children who live in the Queensland mining town of Mount Isa are being ignored.

The city of Mount Isa is located immediately adjacent to Mount Isa Mines (MIM). The company is a major producer of lead, zinc and copper - and Australia's largest atmospheric emitter of sulfur dioxide, lead and other metals.

The compelling evidence has been compiled following collaboration between Dr Niels Munksgaard, Charles Darwin University and Associate Professor Mark Taylor and his research team at Macquarie University. These findings come on top of a series of recent research articles by Taylor and his colleagues detailing the sources and pathways of environmental lead and other metals as well as the inadequate public health approach to the contamination problem in Mount Isa.

Environmental [lead levels](#) and blood lead concentrations in children at Mount Isa are substantially elevated when compared to communities not living close to smelters or mines. As a result, residents in Mount Isa are at risk of long-term health impacts. Taylor and his colleagues say that while the causal link between smelter lead emissions and increased risk of adverse health effects has been convincingly documented and responded to elsewhere. At Mount Isa, the causal link has been routinely questioned and remedial action delayed. The outcome of this

procrastination is that on average, every 9 days a child is likely to exceed the acceptable blood lead threshold of 10 µg/dL.

Previous medical evidence has shown life-long negative health, intellectual and socio-behavioural effects associated with childhood [blood lead](#) levels above 10 µg/dL, the level widely regarded as the threshold above which intervention is necessary. However, there is significant emerging evidence of adverse effects at 5-10 µg/dL and at levels as low as 2 µg/dL.

Taylor and his colleagues are calling for the primary source of the lead problem, the mining and smelter emissions and its historical legacy in the soils and dusts of Mount Isa to be remediated, properly and comprehensively. They argue that this is required urgently to ensure better health and environmental futures for the community and its residents.

“This problem is exacerbated by the reluctance of stakeholders, including Xstrata Mount Isa Mines Ltd, the owners of MIM along with the Queensland Government’s environmental and health authorities to acknowledge and respond effectively to the source of the problem. This being the historic and ongoing mining and smelting activity and not naturally occurring mineralised surface rocks, as has been suggested by stakeholder groups involved with Mount Isa [lead](#) contamination issue” Taylor said.

The full research article by Taylor and his colleagues can be found online in the August edition of the *Medical Journal of Australia*.

Provided by Macquarie University

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