

**A REVIEW BY THE ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH FOUNDATION
OF THE GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO HEALTH CONCERNS RAISED
IN CONNECTION WITH THE OPERATION OF THE
BROOKDALE LIQUID WASTE TREATMENT FACILITY**

In October 2005, the Environmental Health Foundation (EHF) was requested by the Ministerial Council to review matters related to health concerns about the Brookdale Liquid Waste Treatment Facility (Brookdale LWTF). In particular, the EHF was asked to review the documentation in relation to the adequacy of the WA government response to concerns raised by the local community in relation to the operation of the Brookdale LWTF.

The EHF assembled the files related to these issues and engaged an experienced independent expert to assist with the review and analysis of relevant information. The expert was Professor Brian Priestley.

The material reviewed by Professor Priestley and the members of the Foundation included the following:

- The 2002 EPA report and recommendations relating to the proposal to change plant processes and waste acceptance criteria at the plant.
- The 2002 report on air quality monitoring undertaken by consultants GHD on behalf of the Department of Environmental Protection.
- Environmental sampling reports for the period Jan-April 2003.
- Comments from CSIRO air quality scientists on the adequacy of the air sampling methodology used in the above reports.
- Previous independent review panel reports relating to the January 2003 fire at the Brookdale LWTF, and the blood lead testing program.
- The 2004 Brookdale Community Health survey.
- Media releases and other information provided as part of community consultations.

Professor Priestley has prepared a detailed report on his investigation and we have discussed the findings with him. We agree with his main findings, which are listed here.

- The information provided to the community and other stakeholders by Government was appropriate, accurate and comprehensive. There was no evidence that any relevant information had been withheld or misconstrued.

- In extending the operations of the Brookdale LWTF in 2002 the WA Government has consulted with stakeholders and has given thorough consideration to the health and environmental impacts associated with the operations of the LWTF and its proposed expansion. Community concerns that were raised were appropriately addressed through the statutory appeal processes.
- It is clear that the selection of a flawed methodology to assess airborne lead levels reported in the 2002 GHD survey has exacerbated community perceptions of possible risks. The fact that the methodological flaws were not recognised earlier was compounded by the Government's failure to recognise the significance of these erroneous data until some 12 months after they were published. However, the Government then responded by commissioning a comprehensive environmental sampling program based on a methodology recommended by an independent expert. The negative results from these series of surveys should have served to reassure the community.
- An independent panel was established to review the second survey of environmental heavy metals which may have been emitted from the Brookdale LWTF. The panel concluded that the Brookdale LWTF is not a significant emitter of toxic heavy metals into the surrounding environment, other than possible emissions to a local drain through stormwater run-off. The survey data also showed that the fire which occurred on 27 January 2003 had no noticeable impact on the offsite environment.
- The advice given by Department of Health on the reliability of testing urine and hair for heavy metals is soundly based on relevant scientific knowledge.
- We recognise that some members of the local community remain dissatisfied with the Government response to their concerns over health effects from the Brookdale LWTF. We note that some community members have sought further advice from outside of WA.
- We agree with Professor Priestley that the comprehensive studies which have already been undertaken have established that the Brookdale LWTF has not been a significant contributor to health problems in the adjacent community. We agree that there is no merit in the Government engaging in any further health surveys or targeted environmental monitoring unless new and specific compelling evidence subsequently emerges which would require a focussed assessment of specific issues.

Professor Priestley has made two recommendations, which the EHF endorses.

1. That the Government continue to monitor community concerns about the now decommissioned Brookdale LWTF, and continue to provide carefully considered and accurate advice to address any concerns raised.

2. That the health surveys and environmental monitoring studies undertaken to date have been comprehensive and appropriately communicated and there no longer appears to be any need for them to be maintained or repeated.

The EHF advises the Ministerial Council that the community concerns over health effects from the operation of the Brookdale LWTF have been adequately and appropriately addressed.

The EHF notes that the public resources devoted to the investigation of community concerns in this case have been very substantial. Given that no serious health effects have been detected, the opportunity cost of this public expenditure must be carefully scrutinised. In a limited health budget, an expenditure of this magnitude will automatically mean that fewer dollars are able to be applied to other real and urgent health problems. While concerns voiced by a community should always be attended to, the danger of diverting resources from other areas of need must be taken into consideration.

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