

My name is Michelle Sherriff, I am a health professional and a mother. I call on the Daniel Andrews government to place a permanent ban on the unconventional gas extraction industry in Victoria. According to APPEA, the “voice” of Australia’s gas and oil industry “Several major studies have found no link between oil and gas operations and health concerns”. This statement from APPEA is misleading and inaccurate. APPEA has ignored the multitude of scientific studies that confirm the unconventional gas industry poses a serious threat to human health. Of significant concern is the evidence that babies are at greater risk from this toxic industry. I believe that it is the responsibility of the Victorian government to protect communities from the negative health impacts of the unconventional gas industry.

The database of scientific evidence confirming health risks is extensive, and growing every year. Here is a summary of the most recent scientific studies:

In October 2014 researchers identified 8 highly toxic chemicals, including two proven carcinogens, in air samples collected across five U.S. states near unconventional gas wells and infrastructure. They also identified two potent neurotoxicants in these samples. In over one-third of these samples, concentrations of toxic chemicals greatly exceeded federal health and safety standards. Furthermore pollutants were recorded at distances far from the gas wellheads in the vicinity of people’s homes.^{1a}

In September 2014, a study by Yale University found that people living near gas wells had a higher prevalence of skin conditions and upper respiratory conditions than those who lived further away from the wells. These results were consistent findings from previous studies.¹

In January 2014, an association between congenital heart defects and neural tube defects in newborn babies was found to increase with density and proximity of natural gas wells to the mother’s home. This study included 25,000 births from 1996-2009 and was published in the Environmental Health Perspectives.²

Also in January 2014, preliminary data from Princeton University, Columbia University & MIT showed elevated rates of low birth weight among infants born to mothers living near drilling and fracking operations during their pregnancies.³

In October 2013, a preliminary study by Cornell University on infant health found that proximity to gas wells was associated with decreased birth weight and premature birth. Another study by this author identified an increased risk of adverse effects, including low birth weight and a 26% increase in APGAR scores under 8 (measurement of newborn responsiveness where scores under 8 predict increased need for respiratory support).⁴

In May 2014, health professionals reported that infant deaths in Vernal, Utah rose to six times the normal rate.⁵ It is already known that air pollution raises the risk of adverse pregnancy outcomes. The town in which this occurred had experienced a massive increase in gas and oil development over the last six years, resulting in significantly high levels of particulate matter and ozone.⁶

In Tara Queensland, an independent study found that children living close to gas wells experienced symptoms consistent with neurological toxicity. These symptoms included tingling, paraesthesia, numbness, headaches, difficulty concentrating and extreme fatigue. Of particular note is that the majority of these children had not experienced these symptoms prior to living in a gas field.⁷

The symptoms experienced by children in Tara, QLD are comparable to U.S. data which describes symptoms associated with “flaring” of the gas wells; headaches, nosebleeds, burning of the eyes, nose and throat, skin rashes, extreme fatigue, metallic taste in the mouth, blisters on the face (chemical burn), sore throats, swollen lymph nodes, anosmia (loss of sense of smell), gastrointestinal symptoms – including nausea, vomiting and diarrhea are commonly experienced in high fracking areas.⁸

The Daniel Andrews government may be interested to note that in April 2014, A Texas jury awarded a family \$2.8 million because an unconventional gas company operating on a property nearby was producing harmful air pollution and exposed members of the family to harmful emissions of volatile organic compounds, toxic air pollutants and diesel exhaust. The family’s 11 year old daughter became ill and family members suffered a range of symptoms including “nosebleeds, vision problems, nausea and rashes.

I sincerely hope the Victorian government has the foresight and capacity to acknowledge the detrimental effects the unconventional gas industry will have on health. Given the evidence-based risk associated with the industry I would assume the government is capable of estimating the amount of financial compensation that will be required for future victims.

Yours sincerely,

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