



Health and Environmental Investigations into Toxic Heavy Metals in Rosebery – the Need for Health Advocacy

By Kay Seltizas, Resident of Rosebery, Tasmania, Australia, when she made this speech on 19th January, 2010 at a Public Forum in Rosebery Memorial Hall. Photos supplied by Isla MacGregor, Toxic Heavy Metals Taskforce Tasmania (THMTT). The Public Forum was promoted by The LEAD Group, at https://www.lead.org.au/mr/Medrel_20100109_Toxic_Heavy_Metals_Taskforce_Tasmania.pdf and by the Tasmanian Times newspaper, at <https://tasmaniantimes.com/2010/01/health-and-environmental-investigations-into-toxic-heavy-metals-in-rosebery/>

As you all will now know, several residents from Rosebery have been diagnosed with heavy metal poisoning particularly arsenic, lead, cadmium and other heavy metals.

I was one of the five people who were involved in the Government's Investigations into toxic heavy metal contamination in Rosebery last year.

We experienced many difficulties during this investigation.

At the beginning of the investigation we made several requests to the DHHS [Tasmanian Department of Health and Human Services] for them to appoint an Advocate for us but our requests were ignored.

The DHHS and EPA [Tasmanian Environment Protection Authority] Project Team members did not listen to us, did not consult with us, and did not treat us with respect.

They offered no assistance or support to us or other residents to obtain specialist medical, dental or optical assessments relating to heavy metals. **Photo:** Kay and Marsha outside DHHS office.



From the onset, the combined [Tasmanian] Health Department and EPA Project Team Investigation (which handed down its Final



Report in April 2009) seemed to be focused on 'measurements' of various heavy metals rather than having a close look at the medical problems of the Rosebery residents. This attitude was very disappointing and frustrating for us.

The results we received from our biological and environmental samples came back from the Government's own laboratories showing very high levels of arsenic, lead, cadmium, nickel and other heavy metals. The DHHS and EPA ignored these results.

In the early stages of the investigation other residents who were also very ill with heavy metal poisoning attempted to be included in the investigation, but without any reason given, they were rejected by the DHHS. The DHHS, to this day, has failed to provide any assistance to these very ill residents.



Photo: Rosebery residents rally, Hobart, Tasmania, July 2009

Some of the key symptoms and health problems that many of us have experienced include:

- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Headaches
- Metallic taste in mouth
- Numbness in feet and hands
- Arthritis
- Osteoporosis
- Heart and circulation problems
- Depression
- Insomnia
- Lack of concentration and inability to control anger





Photo: Rosebery Residents lumps and curling fingers

Our Taskforce has already written to the Director of Health, Dr Roscoe Taylor, [as at January 2017 Dr Roscoe Taylor was the medical director of Queensland Health's Communicable Diseases & Infection Management Unit] requesting that he appoint a Health Advocate for Rosebery residents. He has ignored our request. If you are concerned about any health issues and feel unable to cope with the Health System on your own, then you can help by asking your Doctor and the DHHS to appoint a dedicated Health Advocate for people in need of support in Rosebery.

A HEALTH ADVOCATE IS ESSENTIAL TO MANY OF US WITH ILLNESSES ASSOCIATED WITH HEAVY METAL CONTAMINATION, AS IT IS NOT ONLY VERY DIFFICULT TO BE OBJECTIVE ABOUT OUR OWN HEALTH BUT WE OFTEN DO NOT FEEL WELL ENOUGH TO ADVOCATE STRONGLY ENOUGH TO AVAIL OURSELVES OF ALL THE RELEVANT INFORMATION THAT WE SHOULD KNOW ABOUT SO WE ARE ABLE TO MAKE PROPERLY INFORMED DECISIONS AND TO BE HEARD.

A Health Advocate can help you to understand what your health rights and responsibilities are as a patient in the health system. Many of our health rights were ignored or abused during our participation with the DHHS investigation.

The Tasmanian Office of the Health Complaints Commissioner produces a Booklet titled the "Tasmanian Charter of Health Rights and Responsibilities" [HCCT, 2006] and in this it states:

"RIGHT 1

ACTIVE PARTICIPATION IN HEALTH CARE

The Rights of the Health Service Consumer

The health service consumer has the right to take an active role in his/her own health care. This role includes making decisions about his/her own health care and being responsible for those decisions.

- The health service consumer has the right to choose a health service provider subject to several conditions including the treatment required and whether the consumer is a public or private patient.

- The right to be provided with information enables the consumer to make informed decisions about his/her own health care. This information might include:

- diagnosis, the possible nature of the illness or disease;

- test results and their implications;

- the approach to proposed treatment or further investigation as well as

- a) what that entails;

- b) the expected benefits;

- c) any likely side effects that may occur;

- d) any recognised risks associated with that

- investigation and/or treatment;

- other options for investigation and/or treatment;

- the likely consequences of any treatment option available;

- likely consequences of not having any particular



treatment or procedure;
an estimate of the costs of any particular treatment or
procedure or other health service fees;
and advice regarding additional services, facilities and support
groups

This information should be presented in a way to best ensure the consumer's understanding. The information should be simple and straightforward. If necessary diagrams, models or other visual aids should be used. Those with physical or intellectual limitations such as visual, auditory or verbal difficulties and those who have other difficulties with language or communication have the right to be offered alternative means of information dissemination. These alternatives may include, among others, interpreters and/or translation services, large print or audio tapes. In these cases and where a health service consumer has limited capacity, information can be provided to a guardian or person authorised by the consumer.

- The right to feel comfortable and at ease and be encouraged to take an active role in his/her own health care in being consulted about options and by participating in decisions.
- The right to take notes, ask questions and expect honest, comprehensive and direct answers in order to clarify information provided by health service providers.
- The right to take sufficient time to absorb and consider information, seek advice and additional information from other sources, and discuss issues with family, friends and supporters.

It may not always be possible to fully exercise this right particularly in emergency situations where there is often little time to consult and consider.

- The right to not only be informed by the provider about his/her condition and options, but to offer suggestions and feedback and discuss these with the provider.
- The right to choose any treatment option available and have the provider respect that decision, even if they prefer a different option.



Photo: Wonita leg rash after yardwork in Rosebery



It is important to note that the provider is not required to provide any treatment with which he/she does not agree and has the right to withdraw from the provision of treatment.

- The right to grant, withhold or withdraw consent for treatment or performance of a procedure at any time.”

The Health Rights Charter also includes information on other rights: Right 2 concerns **Individualised Service that is free from Discrimination**; Right 3 concerns Confidentiality, Privacy and Security; Right 4 concerns **Access to Complaints Mechanisms** and Right 5 concerns **The Right of Carers**.

Our Taskforce has written to the Director of Health requesting that he establish an independent Population Based Health and Environmental Survey that will also include an Animal and Vegetable Testing Program. Our Taskforce has also told the Director of Health that we have no confidence in himself or his Deputy Director Dr Chrissie Pickin to establish an effective new health investigation in Rosebery given the failure of the previous investigation.

Our Taskforce want the Government to appoint a well qualified physician with experience in neurology and a clinical toxicologist with recent “hands on experience” in the examination of patients with diagnosed heavy metal poisoning particularly arsenic, lead and cadmium.

The past eighteen months have been difficult for many people in Rosebery whether or not they are healthy or suffering from different health issues than those associated with heavy metal poisoning.

It is important in our remote and under resourced community to care for those who are in need of support. This is the time for the people of Rosebery to pull together and make sure that the Government does the right thing by setting up a proper population based health survey in Rosebery and providing residents with a much needed Health Advocate.

REFERENCE:

HCCT (Health Complaints Commissioner Tasmania), July 2006, *Tasmanian Charter of Health Rights and Responsibilities*

http://www.healthcomplaints.tas.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0004/145318/CHARTER_July_2006.pdf

RELATED PUBLICATION:

Tasmanian Times Editor, 13th March 2011, *Rosebery: Ross Whitney speaks out. Ross Whitney is a former West Coast miner and resident of Rosebery. Ross has been diagnosed with heavy metal poisoning. This is Ross Whitney's story as told to Isla MacGregor on 9th August 2010,*

<https://tasmaniantimes.com/2011/03/rosebery-my-terrible-experience/>