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LEAD REPORT TO BE FULLY ACTIONED: QUEENSLAND HEALTH

Queensland Health will ramp up its public education campaigns, carry out a follow-up blood test study and continue to monitor and manage children with elevated blood lead levels in Mount Isa.

Queensland Health today released the Mount Isa Community Lead Screening Program report arising from blood lead tests carried out in Mount Isa children during 2006 and 2007.

Queensland Health Senior Director of Population Health Dr Linda Selvey said results showed 45 (or 11.3%) of the total sample of 400 children aged one to four had elevated blood lead levels (greater than 10 micrograms per decilitre).

"The average level was 5, one was as low as 1.3 and the highest was 31.5," Dr Selvey said.

"With healthier lifestyles, improved dust control and continued monitoring, 11 of the 45 identified children have since had their lead levels drop to below the alert level of 10.

"It's very important to ensure that lead levels in children are as low as possible, and as soon as the elevated lead results became known, Queensland Health began actively case managing these children and assisting their families to bring those levels down to below 10.

"These elevated levels were identified as a result of Queensland Health's decision to test children's blood over a period of some 14 months. There is no evidence that any particular part of the city has higher lead levels than others.

"The good news is blood lead levels can be naturally reduced by introducing a few practical lifestyle and household measures such as reducing soil exposure, having better diets and keeping dust levels within the house low."

Dr Selvey said of those with elevated levels, 70% would chew or eat non food such as soil, 91% played in bare soil, 42% would suck their thumb and 77% owned pets such as dogs which exposed them to more dust.

"Queensland Health has been targeting the individual families of the children with elevated levels with these steps but also continues to educate the broader Mt Isa community about living safely with lead in the soil," she said.

"We'll continue to ensure those children with elevated blood lead levels receive the close health monitoring they need and treatment if and when required.

“Additionally, Queensland Health remains committed to its partnership with the Living With Lead Alliance which is doing valuable work to help and educate Mount Isa families.

“Importantly, this report recommends active health management for children found to have blood lead levels over 10 micrograms per decilitre in the future.

“This means that Queensland Health will continue to monitor the results of routine blood testing which remains available for Mount Isa families free-of-charge.

“It’s important that Queensland Health maintains its commitment to deliver practical health assistance to those children with elevated blood lead levels and that’s what this report recommends.

“Still more must be done to control dust within the community and the Living With Lead Alliance will work to identify further strategies to mitigate dust for Mount Isa families.”

Health outcomes identified in the report included:

- 45 out of 400 children studied or 11.3% had elevated blood lead levels.
- Of those with elevated blood lead levels, 2 had levels more than 20 micrograms per decilitre. These children were referred to a paediatric specialist but chelation treatment – used for the most extreme cases – was not clinically considered necessary.
- Indigenous children and younger children were more likely to have elevated blood lead levels.
- Of the children with elevated blood lead levels more than 90% played in bare soil and more than 70% lived in homes with pets.
- Inadequate intake of calcium and iron is a known factor contributing to elevated blood lead levels.

The report recommends:

- Future, continued monitoring of all routinely collected blood lead tests by Queensland Health.
- Active health assistance for all children with elevated blood lead levels.
- Further, continued development of comprehensive dust control measures.
- Continued community education focused on living safely with lead.
- Follow up blood lead level study in 2012.

Queensland Health has been assisting lead affected families by providing:

- Family dietary consultation.
- Home audits to help reduce child exposure to soil, dust and/or paint.
- Further blood testing to monitor blood lead level reduction.
- Encouraging the uptake of free follow up blood testing, which is available through Queensland Medical Laboratory Pathology Services.
- Continued, extensive community education about Living Safely With Lead.

The report can be found on www.health.qld.gov.au.

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