

Toxic waste in town's drinking water



Correlation . . . environmentalist Chris Jonkers tests the salinity of the water at Farmers Creek Dam, Lithgow.
Photo: Edwina Pickles

Ben Cubby and Jonathan Dart
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DOCTORS in Lithgow have protested against the use of industrial run-off in the town's drinking water, saying it could be contributing to the area having some of the state's worst rates of cancer, heart disease and other health problems.

All the town's general practitioners have signed a letter to the local council saying that plans to increase the amount of recycled industrial water, including water used to flush out a coalmine, could be dangerous. No research has been done on possible links between heavy metals in the water and health effects.

The town began to add water extracted from the nearby Clarence Colliery to its drinking supply in 2002, to help make the town drought-proof. The council wants to nearly double the amount to more than 5 million litres a day.

"Lithgow residents unfortunately suffer from some of the worst health statistics in the state," the doctors' letter says. "It is reasonable to suspect that some of these adverse outcomes derive from environmental exposures relating to the region's industrial activities."

The NSW Government, which is responsible for issuing and updating pollution licences for coalmines, said the colliery had not exceeded its licence and that the council was in charge of providing healthy drinking water.

The Lithgow City Council maintains the water is safe, pointing out that most monthly quality tests in the past two years have shown no breaches of health guidelines. Drinking guidelines for aluminium content have been exceeded six times and iron once.

"Based on that information, I think we're doing a very good job of meeting water guidelines," said the council's general manager, Roger Bailey.

But doctors told the *Herald* that residents often complained about the water and many preferred to rely on rainwater tanks. One doctor said he filtered his water at home because of concerns about the recycled industrial water.

Heart disease and cancer rates in Lithgow are 20 per cent above the state average, along with a range of other illnesses. Some of the high rates can be accounted for by smoking and lifestyle factors but the doctors believe pollution may play a role.

Richard Stiles, a GP, said he became concerned after reading a NSW Health bulletin that referred to nickel content in the Lithgow water supply.

It said the content was several times the guidelines for Australian drinking water although it posed no known human health hazard.

"We would really like to know exactly what is in the water, so it would be good to have some transparency on this," Dr Stiles said.

Another signatory and the chairman of the Lithgow Medical Council, John Dearin, presented the doctors' concerns to a council meeting on Monday night. "From a public health point of view, it concerns us," Dr Dearin said.

"I believe we need to look at other sources of groundwater and other ways to augment the water supply instead of using water from the mine."

Chris Jonkers, of the Lithgow Environment Group, said his home at Blackmans Flat, near Lithgow, was among properties to be put on the town water supply if plans to increase the use of recycled industrial water went ahead.

"I don't want to give Lithgow a bad reputation but there seems to me to be a correlation between the pretty bad health figures and the use of industrial water," Mr Jonkers said.

"It seems reasonable that we should be able to get that checked out."