

Poor air quality at home puts Kiwis in hospital

WARRANT EMINENT A. & A.

POOR air quality in New Zealand homes is forcing people into hospital, a Health Ministry report says. The report, *The Health of People and Communities*, says dampness or pollution from unvented gas heaters, second-hand cigarette smoke and poor insulation can aggravate respiratory illnesses — a major cause of hospital admission in New Zealand — and in some cases cause allergic or toxic reactions.

The report, which looks at environmental factors affecting health, follows a Building Research Association study that shows about a third of New Zealand homes regularly fall below World Health Organisation temperature guidelines.

Health Ministry public health advisory committee chairman Alistair Woodward said yesterday older un-insulated houses were often "damp, cold and mouldy", while newer houses could be poorly ventilated, potentially creating damp conditions ideal for toxic fungi.

Mould and fungi aggravated asthma and other common respiratory conditions such as chronic bronchitis, which were major causes of hospital admissions during winter. poorer groups such as the elderly and Maori were the worst affected by poor air quality indoors, he said.

For people who are already having difficulty breathing, these sorts of things can push them over the edge."

Professor Woodward said New Zealand needed to re-examine its high reliance on gas-bottle heaters, which produced "huge amounts" of moisture as well as carbon monoxide and other harmful particles.

The report says the Consumer Affairs Ministry should investigate the health effects of gas-bottle heaters and identify cheaper, safer alternatives, while government agencies need to collaborate more to improve housing quality.

Outdoor air pollution levels and drinking water quality also need improvement, it says. Air pollution prematurely kills about 970 people aged over 30 each year — 400 of the deaths due to vehicle emissions. It says burning fuel particles pose a greater health risk than previously thought. The report also says New Zealand has one of the highest rates of water-borne illnesses such as campylobacter and cryptosporidiosis when compared to similar countries.

A spokeswoman for Consumer Affairs Minister Judith Tizard said Ms Tizard would discuss the report with her officials and those in the Health Ministry about how to proceed on the issue of gas-bottle heaters.