

become more severe and frequent in the future. Minimising the health impact of heatwaves requires public health strategies targeted towards vulnerable groups, particularly older people. The purpose of this study has been to describe the awareness, knowledge and practices of health professionals and care providers regarding the minimisation of harm to older clients from heatwaves, in order to inform the development of effective harm minimisation practices and policies for Victoria, Australia.

Methods An anonymous, cross-sectional survey of personnel from six health profession and care provider stakeholder groups that support the health of older people living in the community was conducted in Victoria in 2008. Descriptive statistics were derived through quantitative analysis.

Results Survey respondents showed a high level of awareness that heatwaves can be harmful for older people; however gaps in knowledge were identified regarding thermoregulation, risk factors for illness and death during heatwaves, high risk groups, heat-related illness and the use of fans. Few organisations were found to have existing heatwave response plans, and responses to previous heatwaves were mostly reactive and opportunistic, rather than proactive.

Conclusions Despite a broad level of understanding of the dangers of heatwaves, an opportunistic, reactive approach by health profession and carer personnel, in conjunction with gaps in knowledge, leaves vulnerable older people in Victoria at risk of significant preventable harm in the event of extreme hot weather.

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MINIMISING HARM TO OLDER PERSONS FROM HEATWAVES: A SURVEY OF THE AWARENESS, KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICES OF COMMUNITY-BASED HEALTH PROFESSIONALS AND CARE PROVIDERS IN VICTORIA, AUSTRALIA

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Background and objectives Heatwaves cause illness and death, and as a consequence of climate change, are likely to