0307 MINIMISING HARM TO ELDERLY VICTORIANS FROM HEATWAVES: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY-BASED HEALTH PROFESSION AND CARER ORGANISATIONS

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Background and objective Heatwaves pose a significant threat to public health and are very likely to become more frequent and severe in the future as a consequence of global warming. Older people are particularly vulnerable to harm from heatwaves. The purpose of this study has been to investigate the role of community-based health profession and carer organisations in Victoria, Australia, in minimising harm to older people from heatwaves.

Method A qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews was conducted from September 2007 to February 2008, in Victoria, Australia. Twelve people were interviewed, representing four professional groups that support the health of elderly Victorians who reside at home. Collected data was analysed using a thematic framework approach.

Results At the time of interview, none of the health profession and carer organisations was found to have formalised heatwave strategies, however their staff conduct a range of activities, as part of their normal duty of care, before and during heatwaves that may reduce harm to elderly clients. Interviewees discussed roles their organisations could play in a heatwave response plan, including coordination, identification of high-risk individuals and education. All saw a need for extra resources and training if more frequent responses to heatwaves were required. Gaps in capacity identified included a paucity of outreach programmes for the homeless.

Conclusion It may be feasible to utilise the existing expertise and infrastructure of community-based health profession and carer organisations operating in Victoria within a State-wide Heatwave Response plan, however this will require extra resources, training and coordination.