

Gas-less homes to increase emissions

RACHEL BAXENDALE
VICTORIAN POLITICAL
REPORTER

The move to phase out gas in new Victorian homes will initially increase the state's carbon dioxide emissions, with the shift from mains gas likely to increase bills for those who remain on the network. Industry figures have warned the Andrews government's decision will move consumers onto an already strained coal-based electricity grid, with those who remain on mains gas longest – who are likely to include the state's poorest and most vulnerable – set to face an escalation in network costs. While Grattan Institute energy program director Tony Wood –

who recently co-authored a paper urging governments to assist Australians to move to all-electric homes – welcomed the announcement, he conceded it would lead to a temporary increase in emissions, and warned governments must find ways to address the “real problem” of rising costs which will be faced by consumers and businesses that stay connected to gas. Energy and Resources Minister Lily D'Ambrosio announced on Friday that from January 1, no new homes or residential subdivisions requiring a planning permit will be connected to mains gas – a measure the government claims will save households \$1000 a year, or up to \$2200 if they have solar electricity installed. The all-electric requirement

will also apply to all new government buildings which have not yet reached design stage, including schools, hospitals, police stations and public housing. Victoria has the highest use of residential gas in Australia, with around 80 per cent of homes connected. Ms D'Ambrosio said the gas sector contributed about 17 per cent of the state's emissions. “The move to electric systems is a key element of meeting Victoria's nation-leading emissions reduction targets of 75–80 per cent by 2035 and net zero by 2045,” the minister said. Mr Wood said Victoria's current reliance on coal to generate electricity meant emissions would in fact increase in the short term.

NEW GAS RULES

For all new housing builds and renovations requiring a planning permit in Victoria from January 1, 2024

Includes all government buildings, including schools, hospitals and police stations

“Right now, because the electricity grid in Victoria is still dominated by brown coal, if you switch from gas to electricity today, emissions would go up. That's different from every other state,” he said.

“However, because the coal-fired power stations are going to be closing over the next 10 years, if you converted from gas to electricity today, emissions over the next 10 years would be lower as a

result of that decision,” he added. Mr Wood said the two million Victorian households currently connected to mains gas would need to transition to electricity in coming years, but that this would increase

network costs for remaining gas users, who would “absolutely” include poorer and more vulnerable households. “The network problem is a real problem, and the government and the companies have to come up with a solution, because either the businesses will go broke or the consumers left will be paying a lot of money for gas,” he said. “That's not a reason not to do it, but it's not an easy problem to solve.” Industry bodies including the Australian Petroleum Production & Exploration Association, Ai Group, Australian Pipelines and Gas Association, Australian Gas Infrastructure Group and Energy Networks Australia expressed concern about the announcement, while the managing director of

Australia's largest air conditioning and gas heating appliance manufacturer accused the Andrews government of denying Victorians choice, even in their own homes. “This dangerous ideology is not only blind to logic and common sense, it defies trends in Europe and North America where gas, far from being banned by zealots, is being embraced with a transition to renewable gas,” said Seeley International boss Jon Seeley. An Andrews government spokesperson said phasing out gas in new builds would in fact save remaining gas consumers and taxpayers money, which would otherwise have to be spent expanding distribution networks. EDITORIAL P14

‘Shoddy’ reports by ABC slammed

ELLIE DUDLEY
LEGAL AFFAIRS
CORRESPONDENT

The ABC's star source in a story implying former commando Heston Russell killed an Afghan soldier repeatedly described his memory as “fuzzy” and asserted he might not be a credible informant, a court has heard, as the national broadcaster's reporting was slammed as “shoddy and uncorroborated”. The revelations emerged on the first day of a five-day defamation trial between Mr Russell and the national broadcaster, which also heard the soldier admit to fraudulently altering an invoice he later gave to a journalist in an attempt to prove he had donated pledged funds to a charity he had raised through Only Fans. Mr Russell has alleged two ABC articles, through the use of links and his photograph, implied he was complicit in the execution of an Afghan prisoner who was captured during a joint drug enforcement operation between Australia and the US. The articles, written and produced by ABC journalists Mark Willacy and Josh Robertson, who are also respondents in the matter, aired on television, radio and online in late 2021. The articles contained allegations from a US soldier using the pseudonym “Josh” that he witnessed Australian forces shoot the prisoner in a “deliberate decision to break the rules of war” because there were too many of them to fit into the aircraft. On Friday, Mr Russell's barrister, Sue Chrysanthou SC, read aloud correspondence between Mr Willacy and Josh in which the latter said his memory was “hazy” and he would be unable to share “actionable information” with the journalist. “Those were some extremely hectic times where we worked with a ton of different units on a variety of missions with not much sleep to be had in between,” Josh wrote, according to Ms Chrysanthou. “So much of it is pretty fuzzy.” In her opening statement of the defamation hearing, Ms Chrysanthou slammed the “shoddy, uncorroborated, reckless reporting” of the ABC journalists. “We've seen conduct which is directed not to ensuring proper journalism but to protecting bad journalism,” she said. The ABC, Robertson and Willacy rely upon the defence of public interest, which was introduced in NSW in July 2021 and remains largely untested. Under cross-examination on Friday, Mr Russell revealed he had made changes to a charity invoice before giving it to Robertson in order to disprove an article that accused him of failing to donate money he had raised through Only Fans, despite promising to do so. Nicholas Owens SC, acting for the ABC, claimed Mr Russell's “lies” demonstrated he was willing to make up stories if it were to his own advantage. Mr Russell responded by saying he altered the document only to reflect the actual invoice, which he was unable to locate by Robertson's timeline. He said he had been “simply seeking” for the article to be corrected and had attempted to go through the usual editorial complaint protest before electing to sue the broadcaster.



Laura Wilson and husband Jake with their brood, from left, Lucielle, Camille with baby Angus, George and Frankie

Birth a solo effort when midwife can't be found

EXCLUSIVE

NATASHA ROBINSON
HEALTH EDITOR

When 32-year-old Laura Wilson gave birth in the shower in a remote Queensland town earlier this year, her husband and two of her children were by her side – but not a midwife, and certainly not an obstetrician.

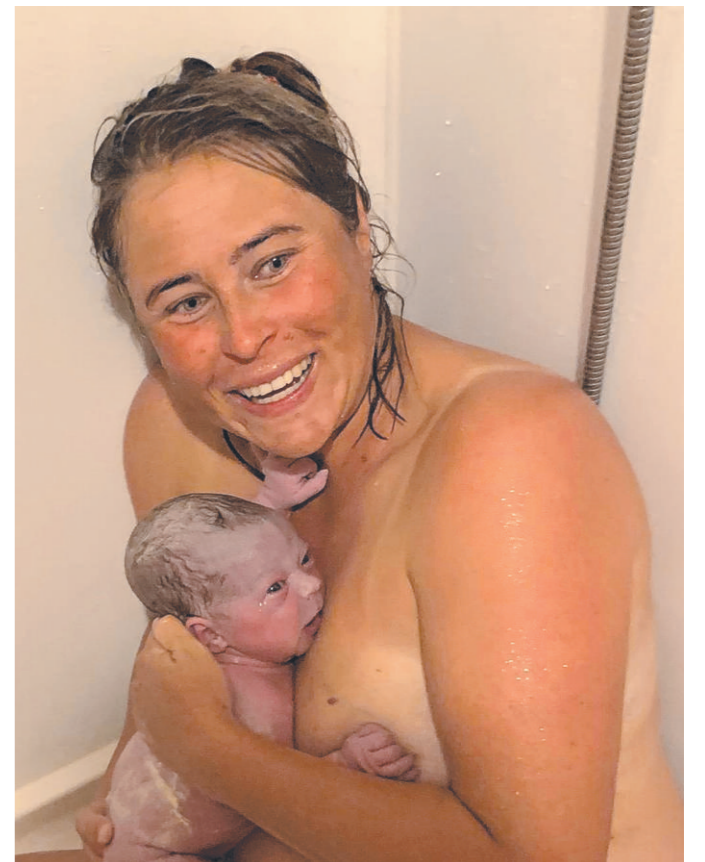
For her previous four births, Ms Wilson had packed a bag at 36 weeks' gestation and made the 900km trip from her hometown in remote central Queensland to Toowoomba, spending weeks in temporary accommodation waiting to give birth. It's the only option for thousands of rural women amid a critical lack of maternity services.

This time, with four children aged under six to care for and a family business to run, it was not possible to leave home. Ms Wilson went into labour in Quilpie – a town that has no maternity service whatsoever and that for six months of last year didn't even have a GP. Ms Wilson ended up giving birth in a rented house in Charleville, two hours from her home, where the family had rushed to in an attempt to access a midwife.

“I don't think I was in the shower long before I called out to my husband to say I was having the baby,” she says. “He came out onto the ground. I placed him on my chest. It was incredible.” “But I do find it a bit upsetting that we don't have access to rural midwifery care. To not have that basic service of being able to deliver your baby close to home, it's really hard.”

After three decades of shut-downs, the lack of maternity services in rural and remote Australia is now a national crisis. Close to 40 services have closed in Queensland since 1998. The number of babies born before arrival at hospital has increased commensurate with the rural service closures. In 2021, 1888 babies were born before arrival at hospital. “Birthing is an incredibly significant event in a family, and to have that happening without support, that's a terrible thing to happen in a country like Australia,” says National Rural Health Commissioner Ruth Stewart. “Of those babies born before arrival we know that many of them survive, but not all of them do, and that is a tragedy.”

Northern Territory-based professor of midwifery Sue Kildea said the situation in remote communities was dire, with between



Laura Wilson moments after giving birth to Angus

18 and 22 per cent of babies born preterm in Top End Aboriginal communities.

“I don't know if there's a word worse than crisis,” Professor Kildea said when asked about the lack of services. “I just think it's absolutely appalling that we don't have national leadership on this.” Professor Stewart is joining with peak midwifery groups and

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SUE KILDEA
PROFESSOR OF MIDWIFERY

rural doctors bodies to call for a midwifery group practice model to be widely rolled out in the bush, with women with low-risk pregnancies able to give birth in local multidisciplinary health centres.

Care would be co-ordinated with obstetrics-trained rural generalist GPs where possible, in line with a successful model operating in WA. Transfer arrangements would be in place for the small percentage of women who may require services in larger centres during labour. “We do already have midwives

in many of these rural locations,” says Liz Wilkes, the managing director of My Midwives, a private practice that services rural towns. “We just need to be enabling them to work to their full scope of practice, which means that they're able to provide birthing services closer to where women live in a model linked to the larger regional centres where there is obstetrics cover.”

The Australian College of Midwives' Alison Weatherstone said a midwifery continuity of care model operating in the context of a wider multidisciplinary team was cost-effective and safe with effective triaging. “Rural women should be able to have choice and access to a maternity model of care that is equivalent to women in metro areas and cities, and we know that's not happening.”

Professor Stewart, the Australian College of Midwives and the Rural Doctors Association of Australia will lead a roundtable on rural maternity services in Canberra next month. “Australia's maternal and perinatal morbidity and mortality statistics are very, very good, but those averaged statistics hide what is happening in the bush,” Professor Stewart says. “The evidence is really clear, rural maternity services can be safe and high quality when well-planned and well-managed.”

Strike postpones Emmy Awards

GEORGIE GRAY
ENTERTAINMENT REPORTER

The Emmy Awards will be postponed for the first time since 2001 due to strikes in Hollywood. The ceremony, originally scheduled to take place on September 18, could now be pushed as far back as January as Hollywood remains ostensibly shut down. Typically, the Emmys, television's most prestigious awards show, are held in August or September. The last time the ceremony was postponed to a later date was after the attacks on September 11, 2001 – that year, the event took place in November. The announcement of the postponement was anticipated. However, until now, the academy and Fox had maintained the telecast's original September 18

scheduled date as a placeholder. The floated January date is dependent on a resolution to disputes between the studios and guilds before then. Stars would not be able to attend the Emmys if the actors' strike was still in effect at the time of the ceremony. Writers would also not be allowed to script a monologue or jokes for the telecast's host and presenters. “Like the rest of the industry, we hope there will be an equitable and timely resolution for all parties in the current guild negotiations,” the TV Academy said last week in a statement. “We continue to monitor the situation closely with our partners at Fox and will advise if and when there is an update available.” The 2023 Emmy nominees were announced on July 12, and they were poised to be Australia's

greatest yet, with stars Sarah Snook, Murray Bartlett, Anna Torv and Elizabeth Debicki all earning nominations in major categories. However, just two days later, the leaders of SAG-AFTRA, the union representing 160,000 television and movie actors, announced a strike after negotiations with studios of a new contract collapsed – with streaming service residuals and artificial intelligence at the centre of the impasse. On July 14, the actors joined film and television writers who walked off the job in May on the picket lines. It is the first time since 1960 that both sectors of the US film industry have walked off the set in unison. A number of multimillion-dollar film and TV productions in Australia have halted as a result of the strikes.

Healing robot tentacles reach deep into body

KAYA BURGESS

A tiny robot that can travel deep into the lungs could transform cancer treatment, allowing doctors to reach and destroy previously inaccessible tumours, scientists say. The thinness and softness of the robot, which resembles a tentacle, and the ability to manoeuvre it with great precision using magnets outside the body means the device can reach deeper than more invasive procedures. Made of silicone, the robot is softer than body tissue, meaning it causes little damage when it comes into contact with even very small bronchial tubes deep inside the lungs. Powerful magnets outside the body are used to help the device bend around tight corners without having to make excessive contact with the walls of the tubes.

It can then take a biopsy sample of a tumour or beam a laser to destroy it. The tentacle-shaped robot itself is only 2.4mm in diameter, more than twice as thin as standard bronchoscope tubes, which measure about 6mm. Even the most advanced forms of robotic tubes currently in use measure between 3.5mm and 4.2mm. The magnetic robot protrudes from the end of a bronchoscope that is pushed in through the mouth, down the throat and into the first parts of the bronchial tree within the lungs, where the tubes are wider. Researchers from the University of Leeds have been testing the device on the lungs of human cadavers and found that the device can reach 37 per cent deeper into the lungs than standard equipment, while causing less tissue damage, according to a study

published in the journal Nature Engineering Communications. Pietro Valdastrì, director of the university's Storm (Science and Technologies of Robotics in Medicine) lab, who supervised the research, called it “a really exciting development”. “This new approach has the advantage of being specific to the anatomy, softer than the anatomy and fully shape-controllable via magnetics,” he said. “These three main features have the potential to revolutionise navigation inside the body.” Lung cancer is often treated with surgery but this can lead to healthy tissue being damaged or removed along with the tumour. Scientists have long sought a method of targeting lung cancer that leaves the healthy tissue around a tumour untouched and does not require opening up or puncturing a patient's chest.

The study concluded: “The results represent a potential first step towards transforming the treatment of cancer in peripheral areas of the lungs via a more accurate, patient-specific and minimally invasive approach.” Professor Valdastrì added: “It will be really transformative for many cases of lung cancer. They are often in peripheral areas of the lungs and it is almost impossible to reach them with current technology due to the size of flexible endoscopes used at the moment. We are halving the diameter of these devices and can reach much deeper inside the lungs.” In a separate study published in the journal Advanced Intelligent Systems, the same researchers managed to use two robotic tentacles at once to carry out brain surgery on a replica skull by pushing the robots in through the nose. THE TIMES