

UNFLUED GAS HEATERS, HEALTH RISKS

397. Mr A.P. O'GORMAN to the Minister for Health:

A new Australian study has indicated that unflued gas heaters, which burn gas to produce heat and have no flue or chimney to transfer combustion products outside, can pose several health risks. What steps is the State Government taking to address this issue?

Mr J.A. McGINTY replied:

I thank the member for Joondalup for the question, because this issue is one of crucial importance to all Australians. Australia suffers one of the highest rates in the world of asthma in children. We must be constantly vigilant about issues that contribute to children suffering asthma, and do what we can to deal with it. A study that has been produced in the past few days by the National Health and Medical Research Council has revealed that unflued gas heaters increase the levels of indoor air pollutants, such as nitrogen dioxide and carbon monoxide. The study found that these pollutants pose a significant health risk, particularly for children, pregnant women, seniors and people with asthma or heart disease; however, high levels could be dangerous for everyone. The most recent study involved 118 schoolchildren from 18 Adelaide schools, with 10 schools using unflued gas heating in classrooms and eight used flued or electric heating. There were significant reductions in asthma symptoms, such as difficulty breathing, chest tightness and asthma attacks, in the eight classrooms with flued or electric heating. The study, a copy of which I would like to table, has been reported in the *International Journal of Epidemiology*, which, in its conclusions, states -

Asthma symptoms were reduced following a replacement intervention that removed high exposure to NO₂. Such replacement should be considered a public health priority for schools using unflued gas heating during winter.

The key messages in that report are -

- Unflued gas appliances produce higher nitrogen dioxide . . . concentrations indoors than found in ambient . . . air.
- Observational studies have shown a link between indoor NO₂ exposure and asthma symptoms.
- This first randomized controlled trial of unflued gas heater replacement confirms the association between NO₂ exposure and asthma symptoms.
- Asthma symptoms and indoor NO₂ levels were substantially reduced following unflued gas heater replacement with electric or flued gas heaters.

That is an important report, which has only just been made public in this country. I thought it was my duty as health minister to draw it to the attention of the public. For that reason I was somewhat disappointed at the hysterical reaction from Rinnai Australia Pty Ltd in an article in this morning's paper, in which it acknowledges the health dangers of unflued gas heaters. That is quite peculiar. At least it has acknowledged that, but it should base its observations on medical and scientific fact that has been established in trials, such as that I have referred to, rather than respond with knee-jerk reactions.

Several members interjected.

Mr J.A. McGINTY: We must now look to a strategic national approach to this issue to ensure that these appliances are phased out over a period so that people can make informed choices on whether to acquire a flued or an unflued gas heater and on how they will run the gas heater if it is unflued so as to minimise the harmful health effects.

Several members interjected.

Mr J.A. McGINTY: I am disappointed to hear the heckling from opposition members. I thought that the health of the community, and particularly those children who suffer from asthma, should be something for which we would enjoy bipartisan support. This is an initiative of informing the public, and I am disappointed that the Opposition does not join us in that initiative.

The SPEAKER: Order! The minister indicated that he would table those documents.

Mr J.A. McGINTY: I thank you, Mr Speaker, for drawing my attention to the fact that I did not table these documents. I table a Department of Health document entitled "Health concerns of unflued gas heaters", which appears on the department's web page. In particular, I draw members' attention to the warning on the second page, which reads -

Be very careful about using an unflued gas heater, especially if:

- Anyone has heart disease, asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease;

- Anyone is pregnant or elderly;
- You have children.

I also table the report from the *International Journal of Epidemiology* entitled “Randomized controlled trial of unflued gas heater replacement on respiratory health of asthmatic schoolchildren”.

[See papers Nos 2490 and 2491.]