

MEDIA RELEASE

Thursday 17 September

Lead apocalypse in one of Australia's most contaminated towns despite 40 years of intervention

Most 2-year-old children tested in Port Pirie have blood lead levels above the national safety threshold. Research presented today at the CleanUp 2026 conference in Adelaide describes why this has occurred and provides alternative possible solutions on how lead exposure could be managed in the industrial city.

Port Pirie is home to one of the world's largest lead smelters, which has operated for more than 130 years. Environmental scientist Graeme Miller, from Southern Cross University and Senversa Pty. Ltd., assessed the impact that smelting has had on current-day residents, based on decades of blood lead monitoring, journal papers and government reports.

His review found that while blood lead levels in children have fallen substantially since the exposure reduction programs began in 1984, they have been increasing during the past 10 years. The majority of children now have unacceptable levels, despite more than 4 decades of intervention.

"About 80% of 2-year-old children in Port Pirie in 2025 had unacceptable blood lead levels," said Mr Miller. "The problem is that essentially every element of the environment they encounter is contaminated with lead, because of the legacy of 130 years of smelting and the ongoing emissions that continue to contaminate the environment in which Port Pirie residents live. It's in the soil, the air, the surface water, sediments, home-grown produce, seafood and chicken eggs."

Young children are particularly vulnerable because they spend more time close to the ground and are more likely to put their hands and objects in their mouths. Lead exposure during early childhood can affect the developing brain and nervous system, with potential impacts including hearing loss, and reduced IQ and academic performance. These effects can be irreversible.

Smelter operators and state governments have used a range of measures to reduce exposure over the past 4 decades, including emissions reductions programs, community education, blood lead testing, air-quality monitoring, investigation and decontamination of homes and soil. But Mr Miller said the most effective long-term strategy identified was to relocate residents away from the areas most affected by lead.

"Relocation was first suggested in 1983, when an independent expert recommended relocating about 1,600 families from residential areas close to the smelter," he said. Subsequent government reports determined that relocation was the only method effective in reducing blood lead below acceptable levels, but it was not adopted at scale because of its cost and practical challenges.

"The lead abatement strategies appear to have remained essentially the same for 40 years," Mr Miller said. "Certainly, blood lead levels have reduced over time, but they haven't reduced to the extent that risks to children in Port Pirie have been effectively mitigated."

Mr Miller said the Port Pirie community deserved clearer communication on the health risks and the implementation of alternative mitigation measures — to reduce the unacceptable incidence of blood lead poisoning and allow the smelter to continue to operate. He said that progressive relocation of affected residential areas to the southern outskirts of town, where lead contamination is less likely to exist, should be considered.

crcCARE is hosting CleanUp 2026 in Adelaide from 13 – 17 September. crcCARE is a partnership of organisations dedicated to developing new ways to deal with and prevent contamination of soil, water and air.

The conference program is available [here](#).

Media enquires

Talent is available for interview over email.

Alysha Huxley, Scientell, 0459 223 089, alysha@scientell.com.au
Simon Torok, Scientell, 0409 844 302, simon@scientell.com.au

Presentation: Lead Apocalypse: Port Pirie, Australia's most contaminated town, 10.40 am Tuesday 15 September (City Room 3, Adelaide Convention Centre)

Media: Complimentary, free media passes are available for any accredited media personnel who wish to attend the conference in person.