

VBA response to the findings of the coronial inquest into the death of Ms Sonia Sofianopoulos

The Victorian Building Authority (VBA) is giving careful and serious consideration to the Coroner's findings and recommendations into the death of Ms Sonia Sofianopoulos.

The Coroner has recommended the VBA consult with relevant stakeholders and review the requirements for the provisions of Certificates of Compliance to the extent that they relate to the servicing, testing and maintenance of open-flue gas heaters.

The VBA will act on the Coroner's recommendations.

The VBA has commenced consultation with key industry stakeholders to review and investigate the most practical and effective way to implement the Coroner's recommendations as specified to the VBA.

Ms Sofianopoulos, 62, was found deceased in her Greensborough residence on 22 July 2017. Her Vulcan gas heater appeared to be operating normally, but was later found to be spilling carbon monoxide – a colourless, odourless and tasteless gas that deprives the body of oxygen once it is absorbed into the bloodstream.

Ms Sofianopoulos died from carbon monoxide poisoning following significant exposure to the toxic gas.

The VBA's Chief Executive Officer Sue Eddy said she was deeply saddened by Ms Sofianopoulos' death.

"I offer my heartfelt condolences to Ms Sofianopoulos' partner, her family and everyone affected by her passing in July last year," Ms Eddy said.

"The VBA has moved quickly to consult with relevant stakeholders as recommended by the Coroner," Ms Eddy said.

"Today's findings by the Victorian Coroner are a tragic and timely reminder that carbon monoxide poisoning can occur in any building with gas heating appliances, including newer models.

"I once again urge all Victorians to have their gas appliances serviced and tested by a registered or licensed gasfitter at least once every two years.

The VBA, in partnership with Energy Safe Victoria and Master Plumbers, launched a free, statewide Carbon Monoxide Safety Program, which began touring regional Victoria earlier this month.

More than 21,000 registered or licensed gasfitters, Type A appliance servicers and their apprentices were invited to attend the Carbon Monoxide Safety Program, which is being delivered by expert trainers.

These free training sessions complement an upcoming online training module and examination currently under development by the VBA. All Victorian gasfitters and Type A appliance servicing plumbers will need to complete this assessment to remain eligible to work in their respective disciplines.

Ms Eddy thanks the gasfitters who have attended these training sessions so far.

"The safety of Victorians should always be our first priority," said Ms Eddy.

The sessions will finish on 28 August in Melbourne. For more details, visit vba.vic.gov.au/training.

ENDS

Media Release

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BACKGROUND

In May 2018, the VBA was invited to make a submission to the coronial inquest into Ms Sofianopoulos' death. The Authority also appeared as an expert witness during the proceedings, providing important information on how gasfitters are registered and licensed.

During the inquest, Coroner Jacqui Hawkins raised concerns that some gasfitters were unable to correctly describe or perform the tests for carbon monoxide spillage and negative air pressure. In response, the VBA began investigating what it could do to refresh the training of gasfitters across the state.

Sadly, Ms Sofianopoulos is one of nine Victorians who have died from carbon monoxide poisoning in the past decade, including brothers Chase and Tyler Robinson in 2010.

More recently, in June this year, a Maidstone family of four was taken to Sunshine Hospital suffering from suspected carbon monoxide poisoning. Shortly after this incident, the VBA conducted a safety audit of almost 100 homes in the area, finding several common gas heater installation faults.

In late June, the VBA conducted an additional Gas Safety Audit of 100 homes across the state to further its understanding of installation faults common to open-flue gas heaters. These included:

- Heaters subject to negative pressure;
- Installation of a flue without the minimum clearance from a combustible surface;
- Incorrect installation of hose assemblies; and
- Installation of a non-compliant flue or cowl.

These incidents were the catalyst for the launch of a free, statewide Carbon Monoxide Safety Program, which began touring regional Victoria in August this year.

More than 21,000 registered or licensed gasfitters, Type A appliance servicers and their apprentices were invited to attend the Carbon Monoxide Safety Program, which is being delivered by technical experts from the VBA, Master Plumbers and Energy Safe Victoria.

During each session, participants receive step-by-step training showing them how to accurately conduct a carbon monoxide spillage test, identify and resolve negative air pressure, and ensure the safe operation of a gas appliance.

They also learn about minimising their exposure to carbon monoxide, the correct use of testing equipment, and the installation of appropriate ventilation to overcome negative air pressure.

This knowledge is vital for ensuring Victorian households are not at risk from carbon monoxide poisoning.

More than 3000 gasfitters and their apprentices have registered to attend one of the Carbon Monoxide Safety Program training sessions.

The Safety Program began in Bairnsdale on 6 August 2018. Sessions have since been held in Wodonga, Shepparton, Traralgon, Mildura, Bendigo, Ballarat, Horsham and Warrnambool. Today, more than 300 gasfitters are booked in for two sessions in Geelong. The program concludes with eight sessions in Melbourne on 27 and 28 August 2018. For more details, visit vba.vic.gov.au/training.

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