



If calling please ask for:
Ms Rebecca Le Tourneau

28th August 2015

Senator Glen Lazarus
Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee
C/- Ms Sophie Dunstone
Committee Secretary

(Sent via post – submission as DVD and transcript)

Dear Senator Lazarus

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment to the Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee inquiry into the use of smoke alarms to prevent smoke and fire related deaths.

Our submission is based on significant research and information we gathered for a major investigative story on Sixty Minutes involving smoke alarms, following the tragic loss of eleven people, eight of them children, in the Slacks Creek house fire in Queensland in 2011. We called our story: 'The Alarming Truth' for the reasons below.

We did not set out intending to produce a story about smoke alarms but as our journey with the Lale and Taufa families began and we sought out expert opinions on what had happened, it became clear that if the families had been required to install interconnected photo-electric alarms, precious minutes, and very possibly lives, would have been saved. It was not their fault. Like Australian families everywhere, except in the Northern Territory, they had absolutely no idea of the different responses of ionisation and photo-electric alarms to developing fires.

Even more tragically, they had turned off their ionisation alarms because they continued to sound when food was cooking, or bread simply toasting. Most frightening is that a large percentage of ionisation alarms installed in Australian homes are at this very moment turned off for exactly that reason.

We discovered that photo-electric alarms react quickly to slow smouldering fires, those commonly started by electrical faults or dropped cigarettes – the fires which kill up to 150 Australians a year and leave many more adults and children suffering the misery of terrible burns for the rest of their lives.

Photo-electric alarms are not triggered by the small diameter smoke particles created during cooking, combustion heating, or open fires. Rather, they react to larger smoke particles, caused by slow smouldering fire in its very early stages before flames develop and before a home is overwhelmed by toxic smoke, leaving residents unable to find their way out, or rendering them unconscious and liable to burn to death.

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I spent many months gathering material for a story which we hoped would alert Australian families to the silent killer in their homes, the alarm which **remains** silent as toxic smoke spreads, the ionisation alarm.

I spoke with fire fighters and alarm experts around the world and discovered a terrible level of frustration amongst good people, trying to implement basic, sensible precautions to save lives. Their research and fears were routinely ignored, or thrown out and it became impossible not to wonder what was driving the installation of ionisation alarms in ninety percent of Australian homes in the face of such horrific evidence.

In the course of research I had to listen to the cries and screams of a mother on the phone to emergency services, trying desperately to protect her five children, as their house, **protected by ionisation alarms which failed to activate**, burnt down around them, killing all occupants.

We also spent time with the Logan House Fire Support Network, a charity run by a tremendous man, Louie Naumovski who had cared for the Lale and Taufu families in the wake of the disaster.

Louie and his wife Christine have cleared up the physical and emotional wreckage left after countless fires have consumed the lives of families in their region of Queensland. The couple work full-time and dedicate every spare moment to raising funds for victims and replacing furniture, electrical goods and the basics of life.

There is now such demand for their support that they cannot keep up with the relentless callouts to house fire victims, in houses '*protected*' by ionisation alarms. Louie and Christine fit photo-electric alarms in every house they attend after fire. Sadly, that is after they have helped the victims gather something from the ashes to continue what life they can.

Even more concerning is that photo-electric alarms are mandated in Australia for all commercial buildings, hotels, hospitals, places where people sleep and paths of egress. We were bewildered as to why photo-electric alarms, with their superior early warning level of protection, were afforded to commercial and public places, but not to homes? Why are sleeping families, in the dark of the night, not afforded the protection required by law for people sleeping in a hospital, or hotel, with staff awake and alerted early, to offer protection and guidance?

We needed to show the public the clear difference between the two types of alarms and their response times but were repeatedly frustrated by fire brigades' in all states reluctance to work with us on a demonstration. It soon became clear that they actually did want to help but were frightened and concerned at the industry politics involved in this issue and the ramifications for them if they spoke out – industry politics which are wasting time and risking more lives.

One brave group, the Northern Territory Fire and Rescue Service, who operate in the only jurisdiction in Australia to have mandated photo-electric alarms in residential dwellings, agreed to assist us in demonstrating exactly how the two alarms react to the threat of fire. The result was deeply concerning, as you will see in the attached DVD of our story.

'The Alarming Truth' was one of our highest rating stories of the year and galvanised our viewing community into action. Photo-electric alarms, just slightly more expensive than

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ionisation alarms, sold out around the country the following day and people slept soundly in the knowledge that if there was a fire, they would have up to 30 minutes to escape.

The ionisation alarms they disconnected (if they were even connected in the first place) would have gone off when the room, or entire house, was engulfed by flame – families then have possibly 3 minutes to wake, gather their children and aged, and escape the inferno.

Which brings me back to the Lale and Taufu families, please do not their loved ones and the lives of so many, be lost in vain – ensure the Australian Building Codes Board takes its head out of the sand and **mandates interconnected photo-electric smoke alarms across Australia** before the next fire takes its next family.

Let us hope your committees' consideration and hard work is not too late.

Yours Sincerely

Rebecca Le Tourneau
Producer "The Alarming Truth"

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