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Energy conscious elderly take risks saving power

A STUDY of energy use among low-income older people has revealed they are being thrifty in their energy use, but with potential health and wellbeing costs.

A team of researchers from the University of Wollongong and Macquarie University surveyed close to 1000 low-income residents aged 60 and over in the Illawarra, Southern Highlands and Shoalhaven regions to ascertain their knowledge, attitudes and practices toward energy efficient living.

The team also conducted focus group research in the community which found older Australians were equipped with a wealth of thrifty behaviours to save energy.

The research is being conducted to inform the Energy+Illawarra program that features activities and materials to open up conversations about energy efficiency, and to help older Australians improve energy efficiency without compromising comfort and wellbeing.

Energy+Illawarra social marketing project lead, Dr Ross Gordon, from Macquarie University, said the research revealed the dominant understanding of energy efficiency among low-income older households is thrift, which is not being wasteful of money.

"In most instances, turning on heaters for long periods of time

and turning lights on during the night were understood as wasteful," he said.

"Other people told us how they wrap themselves up in a blanket in winter because they thought this was the sensible thing to do to stay warm and thrifty."

However, some of these thrifty practices might pose health and safety risks to low-income older households.

"We found one couple who reported that when the gentleman got up in the night he had a bad fall in the toilet, all because he didn't want to switch on a light," Dr Gordon said.

"Other participants spoke of balancing precariously on stools to try to unplug their microwave from the wall socket to save energy.

"We also found people who spoke of only turning on heating and cooling just for when friends and family visited – masking what temperatures they usually live in from those closest to them."

Dr Gordon said it was time to rethink how energy efficiency was understood.

"There needs to be recognition that energy efficiency is using energy wisely and economically to sustain everyday life and promote wellbeing, rather than just a focus on saving costs by being thrifty," he said.