

## FEATURE

SUE GREEN

The parents were frantic: after almost continuous antibiotics for four years, their daughter's chronic chest infections were no better – and in the early hours of every morning the coughing and wheezing really took hold.

Desperate, they called in Nicole Bijlsma, building biologist and healthy home expert. Within minutes of beginning an audit of their home she found the problem: "It came down to a 30-year-old mattress she was sleeping on. It had been in the grandparents' garage and was covered in mould."

One new mattress later, problem solved.

Building biology is a growing field in Australia and Bijlsma, author of *Healthy Home, Healthy Family* (Joshua Books), is a pioneer. A naturopath, she began noticing a connection between patients' ailments and their homes.

But the real crunch came when, after multiple miscarriages, she sent a blood sample to a US reproductive immunologist she read about in a magazine. A diagnosis of immune system problems led her to investigate her home and she made many changes, including moving her bed away from the meter box behind the wall.

Bijlsma now has three children and her interest in building biology led her to study in the US and establish the Australian College of Environmental Studies (ACES) in 1999. "Building biologists are trained to identify and address the health hazards in the built environment from air, water and biological contaminants to electromagnetic field pollution and geopathic stress. They also provide advice to renovate and build healthy homes," its website says.

As well as full-time courses it has healthy home short courses for those wanting to spot the hazards in our homes and learn what to do about them, and for those designing or building their home.

So what are these hazards? Mould, dust mites, chemicals from pesticides and cleaning products and electromagnetic fields from wireless technology are on the hit list.

When Bijlsma audits a home she uses a moisture meter and also turns off the power then, step by step, investigates what is creating magnetic fields, electrical fields and radio waves. She checks for allergens and talks to the householders – does anyone have asthma, frequent colds, bouts of flu and sinus, tiredness unrelieved by sleeping?

And she checks bedding: "What happens over time is mattresses accumulate enormous amounts of dust mites, huge amounts of skin, lots of sweat."

Australia is bucking the trend by moving increasingly to wireless – Germany, in 2007 recommended using hard-wired routers rather than Wi-Fi, Bijlsma says. "We need to use the precautionary principle; we can live in a technological world but reduce radiation exposure, for example using a corded phone."

# Might not mite

THE GROWING FIELD OF BUILDING BIOLOGY FINDS AND DEALS WITH HAZARDS AROUND THE HOME.



NICOLE BIJLSMA SHOWS HOW WIRELESS DEVICES CAN CAUSE POLLUTION. PICTURE: PAUL JEFFERS

So do Australians think this loopy? Increasingly, they're receptive, Bijlsma says. "I think a lot of people question it a lot more than we realise. A lot of people have thought, at some stage, that their mobile phone could be an issue. Cordless phones and Wi-Fi – it's exactly the same frequency. People don't know that."

Raphael Siket is an ACES graduate whose business, Ecolibria, offers services such as mould and air-quality testing, pre-lease and pre-purchase inspections, but also consults on green building design and materials, working with architects and builders.

"We look at so many things – how it is

oriented, where prevailing breezes are for getting cross-ventilation, the type of windows used that allow for good ventilation, building materials," he says. "We are very big on building materials being able to breathe so we try to avoid materials like metal, it's very conductive, it does not breathe, condensates. We are very big on timber because it is so breathable, but it should not be treated with a sealant."

Plastic paints are fantastic to clean, but also do not allow a home to breathe and, particularly in winter, moisture and condensation build up and mould forms, he says.

"A lot of the time it is embedded in the

walls or under the house, in the slab and it makes people very sick. It takes people a long time to work out why they have headaches, persistent colds, fatigue."

Siket says this is a particular problem in new homes which, to be energy-efficient, are sealed tightly with no vents. Sure, cold winds can't get in, but nor can fresh air; meanwhile, inside moisture is building up.

"We believe, as building biologists, the house must breathe and it is your third skin, with your clothes being the second."

LINKS [buildingbiology.com.au](http://buildingbiology.com.au)  
[ecolibria.com.au](http://ecolibria.com.au)

## TIPS FOR A HEALTHY HOME:

- Change pillows every 18 months and mattresses every 10 years.
- Take shoes off indoors – they bring in dust, chemicals, pesticides, microbes, even asbestos.
- Use a vacuum cleaner with a HEPA filter.
- Regularly vacuum mattress after waking, while it is still warm and dust mites are on the surface.
- Use microfibre cloths to clean, not harsh chemicals, especially those heavily fragranced.
- Keep pets off carpet.
- Use low-VOC (volatile organic compounds) paints and finish floors with natural oils rather than sealants.
- Reduce electromagnetic radiation by switching from wireless phones and internet routers to cabled. Test the difference: unplugging all wireless devices for three nights – note changes in sleep or energy.

## LIFE+STYLE+CAR

Octavia Luxury Apartments St Kilda just got a little more luxurious!

The next 3 purchasers of a 1 or 2 bedroom apartment will receive a brand new Skoda Octavia 90 TSi!

For more information and terms + conditions go to:

octavia

[www.octaviastkilda.com](http://www.octaviastkilda.com)



CEEJ DEVELOPMENTS