



Digging up the dirt

Blockbuster-movie heroine Erin Brockovich came to Australia this week to help some small-town residents in a fight against big business. **Barbara McMahon** reports.

FOR 11 years the residents of a tiny community have been plagued by illnesses they claim are caused by pollution from the local refinery. People suffer nosebleeds, nausea, skin rashes and other symptoms. Then along comes a crusading lawyer willing to stand up to the corporate giant that owns the refinery, bringing the plight of the townsfolk to worldwide attention.

If this sounds like the plot of *Erin Brockovich*, the film for which Julia Roberts won an Oscar, well it certainly isn't far from the truth. This current drama is being played out in Western Australia, not Hollywood. But the star of the show really is Ms Brockovich. She was in Perth this week pledging to help a group of people who claim they are being poisoned by the activities of the mining giant Alcoa.

Ms Brockovich said she was examining the merits of a class action suit on behalf of about 160 residents of Yarloop, who believe their health is being harmed by emissions from Alcoa's Wagerup refinery, where bauxite is processed into a fine white powder called alumina, the basis of aluminium.

Ms Brockovich agreed to review the case after receiving an email from a Yarloop resident.

"We think we live in a big world but it's really smaller than you think," she

told an enthralled meeting. "Somebody from the area that was sick, from what they believe to be Alcoa, emailed me. I was intrigued with her illnesses and concerned at what she was suffering through and recommended one of our toxicologists see her and he did. After he did some testing and researching he said 'this is something you should look into'."

Ms Brockovich was speaking at a meeting in Perth. She refused to go to Yarloop, although members of her team have been carrying out research there for the past year. "I have no intention of going anywhere near a facility which is leaking contaminants and could be lethal for me," she said.

Calling mining a "dirty, dirty business," Ms Brockovich said the health problems reported by the residents, which also included respiratory problems and cancers, needed to be investigated urgently. "Those symptoms really reminded me of my original case," she said. "We've got to find a balance between industry and people because neither is going to go away."

Alcoa has denied the refinery is unsafe. Chief medical officer Michael Donoghue said it had been the subject of numerous independent scientific studies. "These studies show that the concentrations of refinery emissions in surrounding areas are well within internationally accepted environmental and health guidelines,"

he said. The company has 122,000 employees in 44 countries. Last year's revenues were \$30.4 billion.

Yarloop resident Cam Auxer said: "Erin is brilliant. She's so committed. She's got a lot of credibility."

Another resident, Alex Jovanovich, who works for Alcoa, said his daughter suffered unexplained nosebleeds, his son blacked out and he and his wife had been ill.

Some Alcoa workers suffering health problems retired and received payouts from the company although it denied liability, according to local media.

"This is not about closing the refinery down, it's about them being accountable for what's happening to our health and giving us the opportunity to move out of Yarloop debt-free," said Mr Jovanovich. "If I sold my house now, I'd lose \$150,000; I think they should compensate me for that."

Ms Brockovich, who took on US company Pacific Gas and won a multimillion dollar settlement for residents of Hinkley, California, has returned to the US. A firm of Brisbane lawyers, called Shine, is taking on the case on a no-win, no-fee basis and will liaise with Ms Brockovich. The firm seems similarly feisty; its website says: "Tough case? We're tougher." The Guardian



ON THE CASE: Erin Brockovich in Perth this week