

Our home is cracking up

UNSELLABLE

HOMEOWNERS say they have been abandoned by building company Metricon after reporting major cracks developing in their new homes.

The *Sunday Herald Sun* has found 12 Wyndham Vale homes, all less than five years old, which have suffered major cracks and other damage caused by slab movement after record rainfall.

Some are in such bad shape they are unsellable. Metricon last week visited all the homes identified by the *Sunday Herald Sun* and in a statement vowed to investigate and resolve the problems.

Owners complain Metricon had previously dismissed or ignored their complaints. Many were told they would first need to rip up existing landscaping and pay for more concreting around their homes before Metricon dealt with them.

The company said it had received an unusually high number of complaints about slab movement since the start of the wet conditions and would review its customer response processes.

A forensic geologist who helped establish Victoria's building codes for slabs says Wyndham Vale is one of the worst suburbs to suffer from ground movement as a result of record rainfalls following a reactive drought



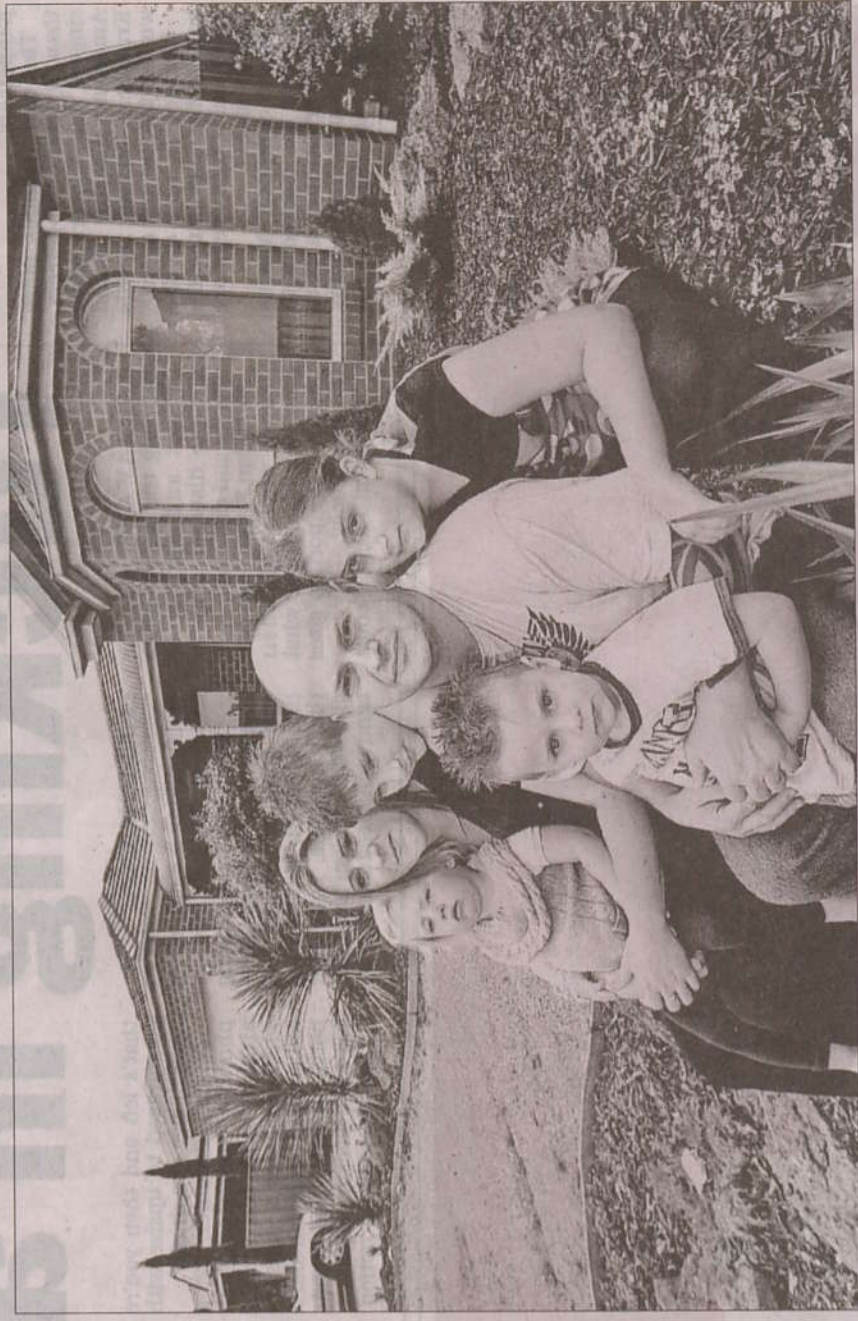
GRAEME HAMMOND
YOUR STREET EDITOR

Dominic Lopes says the problem is affecting all builders and is the result of a combination of bad ground, bad weather and bad construction practices.

Mr Lopes said volcanic clay soil found in the city's north and west and the Berwick area had shrunk during the long drought, but swelled again last year when it became saturated, causing slabs to lift at the edges.

He said the building boom was leading to falling standards because houses were built too quickly by tradesmen using sloppy work practices under poor supervision by building companies. Subdivisions were also poorly prepared.

And he said Victoria's inadequate building insurance system meant homeowners were effectively left to cope on their own. Homeowners last week told of their despair at living



'Embarrassing': Nichole and Jason Benbow with children Ryley, 2, Lachlan, 8, Harrison, 3, and Mikala, 10. Pictures: ROB LEESON

in homes in which metre-long cracks are appearing in walls and floors, cornices are drooping by as much as 5cm and walls are separating from ceilings and floors.

Wide gaps are appearing over doorways as they warp and in one house only two doors can now be closed. One Vaughan Chase resident, who wanted to be identified only as Jennifer, said just one room in her house was undamaged. She said Metricon had treated her "like an idiot". The house of a neighbour, Helen Cassar, also suffers multiple cracks and damage, which Metricon has partly blamed on a poorly

installed drainage system. Mrs Cassar said the company had told her to wait several months for the house to settle, when the cracks would close.

She built the house after a recommendation by a friend, Nichole Benbow, who lives in the nearby Manor Lakes estate, but the Benbows' house is in even worse shape. Their bank has told them the damage has devalued their house by \$25,000 and that it could not be sold in that condition. "It's just so embarrassing having people here," Mrs Benbow said. "People ask, 'My God, what have you done to your house?'"