
Editorial

Air Pollution: Whose Business Is It?

The subject of air pollution is warming up and there is a chance (soon, one hopes) that it may become one of the hot topics in the national media. And then, at last, politicians may begin to listen attentively and to act seriously where, for many years, they have been neglectful and passive.

In January 1997, during a postgraduate meeting for doctors, some of the environmental factors in the causation of lung disease were presented. The ensuing discussion served to confirm the impression that this area is replete with myth, misconception and a vacuum of knowledge even among many in the medical profession. In October 1998, Greenpeace submitted a report to Government outlining the health, social and economic problems of pollution from the burning of fossil fuels and suggested alternatives. In December 1998, several Local Councils followed the lead of Pieta Local Council and joined forces to organise a public seminar on air pollution with particular reference to that caused by the incinerator at St Luke's Hospital and the Marsa Power Station. There was much debate and discussion. The Minister for the Environment spoke well about what his office was actually doing about the problem and why it could not realistically be solved by the stroke of a pen, and why the whole issue of waste disposal was complex, and why it had to take into account the limitations of the Islands' demographic and geographic characteristics. The silence from the Ministers of Transport and Health was deafening! In January 1999, an article, by Dr Ray Ellul and Mr Michael Nolle, in the Sunday Times discussed some of the scientific issues involved in the study and monitoring of air pollution. A similar article, by the same authors, in this issue of Xjenza, outlines the scope of a forthcoming seminar on this topic.

The desire for economic growth is virtually synonymous with higher energy demands. Higher energy demands or production are the cause of air (and other) pollution. The contention is that air pollution is harmful. This is the crux of the matter. Is it harmful? When? To whom? How much? Is all "smoke" - smoke? The scientific community understands much of what pollutes the atmosphere, it understands much of how it gets there and, how, at least in theory, it could be reduced or eliminated. The healthcare professions see the damage, and medical science is rapidly unravelling the mechanisms involved in the causation of this damage. However, debate continues on the extent of the risks of exposure and their time-related effects.

The Health Department has an efficient system of collating data on disease and mortality including that of the respiratory system, but in order to obtain meaningful indicators, the raw data, namely the diagnostic label put on the disease process, must be accurate and complete. In Malta, most likely this is not the case, particularly for those conditions caused by environmental factors. The medical profession has the obligation to educate itself on the subject, to obtain accurate data and to provide it to Government so that appropriate measures can be taken. These measures include the careful monitoring of relevant pollutants over a long enough time frame. The measures also include legislation (new if necessary) and enforcement of that same legislation. The persistence of turning a blind eye and a deaf ear simply will not do any more. For example, the emission of black smoke from diesel engines is totally out of control, yet legislation exists. Incentives to reduce pollution from vehicle exhaust, however, have been reversed by the recent Government Budget.

Few seem to have considered the effects of cumulative indirect exposure through the consumption of plant and animal food as well as through drinking water. The issues of health and pollution become more and more complex as attempts to understand them are made. But that is no excuse to ignore them. Clearly, there is a need for determining priorities and a need to set safe limits of exposure.

In the context of air pollution, it is important to note that whereas in the middle of this century it was black smoke, sulphur dioxide and other products of coal combustion that predominated in the pollution of the urban environment, today it is mainly vehicle exhaust (nitrogen oxides and particulates) which may be more relevant. Therefore, there is a need for more data (see Vella et al in this issue) and emphasis on different disease processes if realistic progress is to be made. Greater academic input from all scientific disciplines is required. For this to take place, Government, in turn, must appreciate that nothing can be achieved without adequate funding. Finally, if public opinion is to be moved it must first be informed with facts and not with misconceptions. Then, politicians too might make air pollution their business.

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