European nations agree to improve environmental health

Robert Walgate

European ministers signed a declaration on environmental health last week, setting time-bound targets for their countries to achieve improvements in this area. Robert Walgate reports.

Health and environment ministers of the 53 nations of the WHO European region, stretching from Greenland to Vladivostok, and the Arctic to the Caspian Sea, met for their fifth summit in Parma, Italy, last week, and, for the first time, agreed to set deadlines for improvements in environmental health across this diverse region.

But Russia, the world’s biggest producer of asbestos, vetoed a proposed asbestos ban, and at the last minute also tried to wreck an agreement among all members to greatly increase the pace and power of European health and environment planning, saying they could no longer endorse it. Only quick thinking by the new Regional Director for Europe, Hungarian Zsuzsanna Jakab, avoided a crisis, leading to the approval of the Parma Declaration (panel) and the new European Environment and Health planning process, by acclamation.

Panel highlights from the Parma Declaration

- Provide children with clean air, satisfying WHO’s air quality guidelines by 2015
- Protect children from harmful substances by 2015
- Act on identified risks of exposure to carcinogens, mutagens, and reproductive toxicants including radon, asbestos, and endocrine disrupters, and develop by 2015 national programmes for the elimination of asbestos-related diseases
Ministers and most non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were pleased with the outcome. The ministers of health and environment in Italy—Ferruccio Fazio and Stefania Prestigiacomo—told The Lancet that since the targets come from a UN body, are agreed by so many countries, and are based on good evidence, they give strength to any argument in cabinet or with the finance minister for necessary funds.

Others agreed, and Sascha Gabizon, executive director of the Women in Europe for a Common Future, said: “Time-bound targets are a great step forward. The NGOs and even many member states and WHO tried to get deadlines into the Children’s Environment and Health Action Programme for Europe in Budapest in 2004, but all of them were taken out during negotiation. So getting them in this time—even though they don’t set real levels of reductions—is very useful.”

Anja Leetz, executive director for Health Care Without Harm Europe, was considerably more sceptical. “Take the harmful substances clause. It’s very unspecific. Within the European Union, the new REACH [Registration, Evaluation, Authorisation and Restriction of Chemicals] legislation will apply. So the chemical DEHP [Bis(2-ethylhexyl)phthalate], a plastics softener and endocrine disrupter, is on the REACH candidate list to be banned, but REACH has an exemption for medical products. So, for example, premature babies will be exposed to DEHP via feeding tubes even if the substance may be banned in 2 years time for other applications. How do health and environment ministries collaborate? Not very effectively, is what I gathered in Parma.”

The new European Environment and Health planning process, to which Russia had objected, will monitor progress on all targets, including cross-sectoral collaboration and monitoring of new research, up to the next summit in 2016. And it will be lifted to ministerial level, with a European Environment and Health Ministerial Board, which should include four health and four environment ministers to speed political negotiation. NGOs and economic and industry representatives will also be present.
Russia objected because the planning process was not UN procedure. It was concerned that the NGOs in the process might not be really non-governmental, but acting as stooges for some government, a member of the Russian delegation to the summit, Evgeny Kovalevsky, occupational scientist and member of the Russian Academy of Medical Sciences, told *The Lancet* later. But finally, he said, it was a “technical matter”.

Russia had also caused problems during the negotiation of the Parma Declaration, over the call for a ban on the use of asbestos by 2015. Russia insisted this be watered down to a clause calling on countries to set up plans to eliminate asbestos-related diseases by 2015.

However, NGOs suspect Russia will ignore even this reduced commitment, as it does not recognise the existence of asbestosis in its territory. Russia produces chrysotile asbestos, which it argues does not cause serious disease. When asked if Russia would respect the clause, Kovalevsky said: “Governments need information to act. So we have established an epidemiological study on the existence of asbestos-related diseases in our country.”

Zsuzsanna Jakab told *The Lancet* that she would visit Russia this week, and asbestos will be one of the items on her agenda. “We will review the scientific evidence together with the government, and I hope that at the next conference we will get an even stronger declaration on this issue.”

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