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## Cut emissions, boost health

By Hugh Montgomery - Today, 05:15 CET

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### Reducing greenhouse gases is even better for public health than a European Commission study suggests.

The European Commission this week published a staff working paper that considered the impact of reducing greenhouse-gas emissions by more than the EU's current target of 20% by 2020.

It underlines something that doctors have long known – that, as well as mitigating climate change, a reduction in greenhouse-gas emissions would directly help the public's health and so would help to reduce healthcare budgets across Europe. As policymakers continue to look for ways out of our current financial troubles, they should take note.

However, the even better news is that the savings highlighted by the Commission are actually a serious underestimate. The Commission considers only loss of life ('mortality effects') associated with improving air quality – and identified savings of between €3.3 billion and €7.9bn annually. However, when consideration is given to ill-health ('morbidity') relating to chronic bronchitis, cardiac and respiratory hospital admissions, restricted activity days due to poor air quality, consultations for asthma and upper respiratory symptoms and days of respiratory-medication use by adults and children, greater benefits are seen. A recent independent report published by Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL) and Health Care Without Harm (HCWH) showed that raising the domestic target from 20% to 30% would save an additional €10bn-€30bn each year.

Furthermore, neither report considers the full range of health benefits that a low-carbon lifestyle brings. Thus, more active forms of transport – cycling and walking – reduce 'tailpipe' pollution, while less meat consumption means less methane from cattle. Quite independently of their effects on greenhouse-gas emissions, taking more exercise and eating less meat are healthy choices, reducing rates of Alzheimer's disease, depression, osteoporosis, obesity, diabetes and various cancers, as well as rates of heart attack, high blood pressure and stroke. A detailed analysis in the Lancet, a British medical journal, in 2009 provided detailed data on this issue.

It is one thing to consider the pan-European savings, but how would these numbers from the HEAL/HCWH report translate at the level of member states? The biggest winners would be Germany, with benefits of up to €8bn per year from 2020, and Poland, with up to €4bn annually. There would also be very sizable benefits for France (€3.5bn) and Italy (€3.4bn). Good news in such gloomy economic times.

So what will the Commission and member state governments do about it? The short answer is 'not enough'.

There is far too much talk of 'costs' when these in fact represent 'investments' – investments that, when made smartly, would yield a substantial health-economic dividend. No one knows better than a doctor that preventative public-health intervention is preferable to treatment once a disease has taken hold.

The benefits to health and budgets from more ambitious emissions reductions are clear, but we must not forget that these come in addition to a reduction in the health risks posed by climate change itself.

Knowing that they will be on the frontline of climate change, doctors and medical groups are becoming increasingly vocal in arguing that the health implications of climate change should be considered.



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European policymakers know what is good for them – their own documents acknowledge this.

They have written their own prescription. They should now take their own medicine.

Hugh Montgomery is a professor at University College London, a co-founder of Climate and Health Council, UK and a member of the European health NGO delegation to the [United Nations](#) Framework Convention on Climate Change.

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