

Revealed: Coal's Unpaid Health Bill

European coal-fired power plants are causing 18,200 premature deaths and serious illnesses that cost the population up to €43 billion each year, say health experts in a new report entitled *The Unpaid Health Bill—How coal power plants make us sick*.

The Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL) also expresses concerns that dirty emissions from coal are contributing to climate change, which itself will create more costly public health problems—especially amongst the most vulnerable groups—the young and elderly. Despite this double threat, the use of coal as an energy source is now on the rise in Europe.

Coal use is projected to rise worldwide throughout 2013 which is, ironically, the EU's designated Year of Air. Health experts at HEAL are now urging governments to put a stop to building new coal plants in Europe and abandon coal altogether by 2040. If the share of coal in power generation is not brought down over the next decades, Europe will put in jeopardy its climate target for 2050.

In October 2011, over 500 health and security experts, including medical associations, leading medical research institutes and public health organisations, called on governments to ban the building of new coal-fired power plants without Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS) technology, and to phase out the operation of existing coal-fired plants, starting with lignite plants due to their most harmful effects on health.

Last year at the UN climate talks, medical organisations petitioned negotiators at the international climate talks in Doha, Qatar (<http://dohadeclaration.weebly.com/index.html>) to recognise that worldwide millions of deaths each year have been linked to air pollution that occurs as a result of burning

coal. The World Medical Association was among the top medical group signatories to the so-called Doha Declaration on Climate, Health and Wellbeing. Dr. Cecil Wilson, President of the WMA, said he was extremely worried about the slow progress in international negotiations and called on the world's leaders to recognise the impact on health from climate change.

As the “first ever economic assessment of the health costs associated with air pollution from coal power plants in Europe”, this report highlights evidence on how exposure to air pollutants affects the lungs, heart and nervous system. Effects include chronic respiratory diseases, such as chronic bronchitis, emphysema and lung cancer; and cardiovascular diseases, such as myocardial infarctions, congestive heart failure, ischemic heart disease and heart arrhythmias. Acute effects include respiratory symptoms, such as chest tightness and coughing, as well as exacerbated asthma attacks.

Children, older people and patients with an underlying condition are more susceptible to these effects. Children are particularly susceptible to air pollutants, in part because they breathe more air in relation to their body weight and spend more time outside, but also due to the immaturity of their immune and enzyme systems and their still-developing airways. In addition, coal power plants are the largest source for mercury emissions in Europe, a heavy metal that is well known to affect brain development in children. A recent study put the price tag of this mercury exposure at about €9 billion per year.

The report draws on the work of medical and health groups in the US, Australia and elsewhere around the world. The intention is that the report will stimulate further engagement of doctors and other health groups around the issue of coal and health,

especially in countries where coal burning is a major contributor to poor air quality. In coming months, the Standing Committee of European Doctors (CPME), which has 27 members representing medical doctors in EU countries, will be raising awareness of the risks of coal burning as part of its work underlining the importance of cleaner air.

Medical professionals are powerful advocates for better policy to protect health. Medical doctor and German Member of the European Parliament, Peter Liese has already indicated his support for the report. He says he recognises coal as both an immediate and a long-term threat to public health because of its contribution to climate change.

HEAL will be running a Health and Coal educational and advocacy campaign throughout Europe, with national launches planned in Germany and Poland in close collaboration with medical experts, asthma groups and local experts. Expertise and testimonies from doctors and others in the health community are key to our success, and we invite you to join the collective efforts to prevent chronic disease and suffering from coal power pollution.

This article is adapted from one which appeared on the blog of the Collaborative on Health and Environment (CHE) <http://ourhealthandenvironment.wordpress.com/2013/03/07/778/>

HEAL's vision is a healthy planet for healthier people in Europe and beyond. We show how environmental action can bring down rates of asthma, obesity, diabetes, cancer and infertility working closely with our members in more than 26 countries.

Génon Jensen
Executive Director, Health and
Environment Alliance (HEAL),
Coordinator of CHE's Climate Change
and Health Working Group.