



INFORMATION RELEASE

Turkish doctors say cleaner air would offer major health benefits

Brussels / Ankara, 23 February 2015 – A briefing released today highlights the heavy toll on health resulting from exposure to poor air quality in Turkey.(1) It has been endorsed by five medical organisations including the Turkish Medical Association, Turkish Society of Public Health Specialists, Turkish Thoracic Society, Turkish Respiratory Society and Turkish Occupational Medicine Society.

Turkey has one of the highest rates of premature deaths due to air pollution in Europe. An estimated 28,924 people in Turkey died prematurely from ambient particulate matter (PM) and ozone exposure in 2010, according to recent estimates. (2)

Polluted air has harmful effects on the lungs and heart, and is a particular problem for anyone with asthma or existing respiratory or cardiac conditions.

While these effects are well known, latest scientific findings show compounded risks to children's health. For example, evidence is growing that maternal exposure to air pollution is contributing to a greater risk of her baby being born with low birth weight or pre-term. Other studies point to the risk of maternal exposure leading to the development of chronic diseases in her child later in life, including obesity, diabetes and hormone-related cancers, such as of the breast, prostate and testes.

Poor air quality stems from many sources, such as industrial processes, transport, or agriculture; but the energy sector is a major contributor to air pollution as well.

“Inhaling polluted air exacerbates a multitude of health problems. Cleaner air in cities would substantially improve public health. However, the contribution that air quality makes to good health is often neglected,” says Prof. Dr. Bayazit İlhan, the President of the Central Council of Turkish Medical Association. “We are monitoring the Turkish government's energy policies, which heavily base future energy supply of the country on coal power generation. We, as TTB and other concerned speciality associations call on the Turkish government to take the health impacts and costs into account in discussions and decisions about energy production and supply; particularly decisions on increasing the number of coal-fired power plants.”

In a press release in October 2014, five Turkish medical associations and societies led by the Turkish Medical Association (TTB) had called on the Turkish Government not to allow for the building of any new coal power plants, to make the use of best available techniques in the existing plants mandatory, and to phase out coal power plants TPPs starting from lignite using plants, which are known to have the most hazardous health impacts. (3)

Turkey is currently envisaging 80 new coal plants and has plans to make the Afsin-Elbistan power complex the biggest coal-fired plant in the world.

“HEAL welcomes the fact that doctors and other health professionals in Turkey are highlighting the costs to health from coal, and we look forward to create international cooperation with doctors and medical professionals on raising awareness. We want to encourage national decision makers to take seriously the health impact of energy decisions,” says Deniz Gumusel, HEAL’s Air Quality and Energy Consultant in Turkey. “Choosing to expand or build new coal power plants would be detrimental to efforts aimed at tackling chronic disease and protecting children’s health.”

Coal and health

Air pollution from energy generation and use, including coal power plants is of particular concern in Europe, especially in Turkey and the Balkans. Figures from HEAL’s report “The Unpaid Health Bill, How coal power plants make us sick” shows health costs of up to 43 billion EUR each year for the EU28 as a result from exposure to air pollution associated with coal-fired power plants. (4) HEAL is working on a similar study regarding the health costs of coal power plants in Turkey, to be published in the coming weeks.

History has shown rapid improvements in public health following stronger regulation to improve air quality. For example, the ban on coal burning in Dublin, Ireland in the 1990s resulted in an 8% reduction in total mortality in the city as well as reductions of 13% in respiratory disease and 7% in cardiovascular disease.

HEAL hopes that drawing attention to the health costs of exposure to polluted air will be more systematically taken into account in national energy decision-making. During the past year, the national debate on energy decisions in Germany and Poland has included a discussion of the impact of poor air pollution on health and the harm from coal power generation in particular. (5)

The new briefing by HEAL and Turkish health organisations recommends that medical professionals consider environmental factors when diagnosing patients, check and inform patients on the air quality situation in their region, and engage in policy developments on energy choices. (1)

Medical Organisations concerned about Air Pollution

The Turkish medical organisations are worried about low air quality in Turkish cities and are closely following the plans to increase coal power plant investments.

The Turkish Thoracic Society organised a conference in January and established a task force for the investigation of air pollution in the country; they have made air quality a high priority for the association.

The Turkish Society of Public Health Specialists highlights the fact that particulate matter (PM) limit values defined in the Turkish bylaw on Air Quality Evaluation and Management are much higher than the recommendations of the World Health Organization (WHO). The Society calls on the Ministry of Health to take urgent measures and urges the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization to amend the bylaw in order to decrease the PM limit values to the level of those recommended in the WHO Air Quality Guidelines.

The Turkish Occupational Medicine Society underlines that most of the coal-fired power plants in Turkey use lignite. The ash content of lignite and air pollutant emissions from lignite-fueled power plants are considerably higher than from black coal, and thus lead to massive environmental health problems.

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Notes to Editors:

1. Air Pollution and Health in Turkey: Facts, Figures and Recommendations, English http://env-health.org/IMG/pdf/150220_factsheet_air_and_health_turkey_en_final.pdf
Turkish http://env-health.org/IMG/pdf/150220_factsheet_air_and_health_turkey_tr_final.pdf
2. OECD, referring to data from the Global Burden of Disease Assessment. OECD (2014). The Cost of Air Pollution - Health Impacts of Road Transport, OECD Publishing. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264210448-en>, <http://www.oecd.org/environment/the-cost-of-air-pollution-9789264210448-en.htm>
3. Turkish Medical Association, et al (2014). Kömürlü termik santraller çevreye ve sağlığa zararlıdır [Press Release]. <http://www.ttb.org.tr/index.php/Haberler/komurlu-4871.html>
4. The Unpaid Health Bill, How coal power plants make us sick, HEAL, March 2013 <http://www.env-health.org/news/latest-news/article/the-unpaid-health-bill-how-coal>
5. HEAL Annual Review 2013, Climate and Energy, page 11, <http://www.env-health.org/resources/publications/article/annual-review-2013>

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