Unmask my City: Anti-air pollution campaign launched in Europe

Brussels, 2 May 2017 - The Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL) is calling on city authorities to clean up the air in Europe as part of the "Unmask my City" campaign launched today on World Asthma Day 2017.

Unmask My City (1) is a global initiative by doctors, nurses, public health practitioners, and allied healthcare professionals dedicated to improving air quality and reducing emissions in our cities. It calls for all cities to meet the World Health Organization's air quality guidelines (2) and to adopt policies and programmes that will put cities on a path towards meeting this objective.

HEAL is leading the campaign in Europe.

"Air pollution remains a serious health risk in Europe. Ninety per cent of the urban population is exposed to levels considered harmful to health by the World Health Organization," says Roberta Savli, Deputy Director at HEAL.

"We have the solutions – such as replacing coal with renewable power sources. The challenge is to create the political will to rapidly implement them for better health and to mitigate climate change."

Coal-powered electricity generation is responsible for 18,600 premature deaths in the European Union. (3) Other solutions, including alternative transport fuels, switching freight to trains, providing cleaner fuels for home heating, and better infrastructure and urban planning to support active travel policies, will improve people's health and reduce global warming simultaneously.

HEAL is supported in Europe by the Standing Committee of European Doctors (CPME), International Association of Mutual Benefit Societies (AIM), European Respiratory Society (ERS), European Academy of Allergy and Clinical Immunology (EAACI), European Federation of Allergy and Airways Diseases Patients' Associations (EFA), European Lung Foundation (ELF), and the International Primary Care Respiratory Group (IPCRG).

Caption: Weronika Piestrzyńska, HEAL Poland Health and Energy Programme Manager, monitoring air quality using a special 'light mask' in Poland. Here the mask glows yellow, showing air pollution levels are roughly twice World Health Organization limits. Copyright: Global Call for Climate Action / Greg McNevin (4)

In Poland, Serbia and Turkey, HEAL is working with local staff and national health professionals to promote solutions tailored to the sources of air pollution most impacting each city, and the regulatory, policy or other solutions best suited to create positive change in air quality. A key feature of the campaign is the creation of visual communication materials showing people in different cities using a 'light mask,' a face mask equipped with LED indicators to monitor air quality. When air quality is good and PM2.5 levels are low, the mask lights up green; when air quality is bad and levels are high, the mask turns red.

Following the launch today, European city campaigns are being rolled out in Warsaw, Poland (13 May), in Adana, Istanbul and Hatay, Turkey (15 May); in Belgrade, Serbia (4 May) and in London by UK Health Alliance for Climate Change. Other launches include Salt Lake City, US; Chennai and Ahmedabad, India; Sao Paulo, Brazil.

Air pollution in Europe is responsible for around 467,000 premature deaths in Europe every year. (5) Three quarters of the European Union's population lives in urban areas and this percentage will increase to 80% by 2020. Cleaner air will save lives, improve health, and make a huge contribution to greenhouse gas reductions needed to keep the world safe from climate change crises.

HEAL represents the non-governmental sector in the European Environment and Health Process coordinated by the World Health Organization. The Sixth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health will take place 13-15 June 2017 in Ostrava, Czech Republic.

Contacts

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Notes for journalists

1. Unmask My City, www.unmaskmycity.org

   The global initiative is coordinated by the Global Climate and Health Alliance together with HEAL, Health Care Without Harm, the US Climate and Health Alliance, and the UK Health Alliance for Climate Change. We are connecting with local health partners and their communities to promote practical solutions and create tangible city level policy changes that drive a clear, downward global trend in urban air pollution by 2030. This will save millions of lives, improve health outcomes for billions of people, and make a huge contribution to greenhouse gas reductions needed to keep the world safe from climate change crises.

   A factsheet on global air pollution, health and climate change is available from the Unmask My City website and online from https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B0Pejp-ZUVusRzJEQUgwVnlTbnc/view?usp=sharing

A media backgrounder on the Unmask My City campaign is available online from https://docs.google.com/document/d/1JmD8fHnlKW9swBqAaKxotv4gJHY_MQtCZfjED31zRNE/edit?usp=sharing.

2. World Health Organization, Fact Sheet, Ambient (outdoor) air quality guidelines, September 2016, http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs313/en/
WHO Organization's air quality guidelines for particulate pollution: PM2.5: 10 µg/m3 annual mean 25 µg/m3 24-hour mean/PM10: 20 µg/m3 annual mean 50 µg/m3 24-hour mean

3. Unpaid Health Bill, HEAL, March 2013, http://www.env-health.org/resources/projects/unpaid-health-bill/

4. Press photos of the Unmask My City campaign https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B2hxKpTrz5coX25hVkIxYWRaVEU

5. European Environment Agency, February 2017, Stronger measures needed to tackle harm from air pollution, http://www.eea.europa.eu/highlights/stronger-measures-needed

The Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL) is a leading European not-for-profit organisation addressing how the environment affects health in the European Union (EU). With the support of more than 70 member organisations, HEAL brings independent expertise and evidence from the health community to different decision-making processes. Our broad alliance represents health professionals, not-for-profit health insurers, doctors, nurses, cancer and asthma groups, citizens, women's groups, youth groups, environmental NGOs, scientists and public health research institutes. Members include international and Europe-wide organisations as well as national and local groups. Website: www.env-health.org. Follow HEAL on Facebook and Twitter @HealthandEnv @EDCFree and @CHM_HEAL