

Commentary II

Environment and health: from national policies to global initiatives

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In this issue of the journal, Kahlmeier and collaborators provide an interesting update of the efforts to implement the National Environment and Health Action Plan (NEHAP) in Switzerland, within the Swiss Action for Sustainable Development. The basic idea of the NEHAP is that health is the outcome of all the factors and activities acting upon the lives of individuals and communities. Various sectors of the society, not only the health sector, have to be involved in planning, financing, and taking care of the different issues with a potential impact on health. This concept has been reiterated during the Third Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health (World Health Organization 1999). A good application is the Charter on Transport, Environment and Health as a framework for measures to facilitate the integration of health issues in decisions, planning and investments affecting transport and mobility. Environmental monitoring, quality assurance, epidemiologic expertise, health impact assessment, work in partnership, professional experience in risk communication, all are the key elements for a success.

The practice is always more difficult than the theory, however. It has been already indicated that the field of environmental health on one side and that of public health on the other side have repeatedly found themselves isolated and separated (Kotchian 1997). Environmental agencies often neglect their public health responsibilities and public health agencies abdicate their environmental responsibilities under the pressure of the "health market". Even the simple role of advocacy of the public health agencies to demand structural changes in order to implement primary prevention measures is often forgotten. To "ensure a link between health and environment on a structural level", to "translate the action plans in an "action process with adequate financing", as the authors stress, are urgent needs not only for Switzerland but also for many European countries.

This is the difficult world of national policies. "Globalisation", however, is the new word that defines the current era. It has several implications for those involved in environment and health issues. Some of these implications, in particular with regards to epidemiology, have been recently reviewed (Hertz-Picciotto & Brunekreef 2001). Within this context, there are two menaces for the health status of our world: wars and ecological changes. The first is immediate while the second requires some time to fully express all its impact. The question is: should we bother of them?

During these days of war when the fear of terrorist attacks undermines our lives, "collateral damages" kill innocent people, UN pleads for break in bombing in Afghanistan (Ahmad 2001), all the potential health effects directly and indirectly associated with war are difficult to be foreseen. Many of the indirect effects will take place through environmental destruction, use of biological and chemical weapons, limit in the use of natural resources, mass mobilisation, all leading to drought, famine and humanitarian disaster (Horton 2001).

The adverse health consequences of climatic change have been made clear by an international scientific body (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2001): the warming has already begun, changes in physical and biological systems are apparent across all continents, a temperature rise in this century has been foreseen (McMichael 2001a; McMichael 2001b). Large-scale environmental changes are now under way. All these changes have great consequences for the sustainability of ecological systems, for food production, economic activities, and human health. As McMichael (2001a) has clearly stressed, "... in the long run, it is the conditions of social and natural environments that set the limits to human health and survival and that determine the patterns of disease". Only radical changes in energy systems, and in setting economic and social priorities could reverse

this process. Unfortunately, the president of the most developed nation, with the greatest responsibility for the greenhouse effect, refused even small changes under the Kyoto Protocol (McMichael 2001a). In the mean time, we all know that air pollution from current fossil fuel use for transportation, industry and housing is killing millions throughout the world (Künzli et al. 2000; Cifuentes et al. 2001).

In conclusion, difficulties at national level to implement integrated policies for environment and health will certainly require effort, coordination, and public participation. During these days, however, we cannot ignore that the large-scale impacts induced by wars and ecologic shifts need to be addressed by those interested in public health.

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