

Marie Arnold from Client Earth

Client Earth is an environmental law organisation who also lead the healthy air campaign. Traditionally we do the very detailed policy and legal analysis, but in relation to air quality it is a very public facing angle, trying to engage the public in the issue.

If you were to take a list of health issues such as obesity, alcohol, smoking, air quality and traffic accidents, and ask most people what they thought were the most important, you would find that air quality never comes top of the list, in fact normally it comes at the bottom. A group of 100 MPs were recently surveyed and that's what they found.

In fact, air quality is second in the list in terms of amount of premature deaths caused. Poor air quality in the UK causes 29,000 deaths per year, that's more than obesity and alcohol combined. Yet you just don't see any discussion about it. So you kind of forgive the public for not being aware, because the government never talk about it. And when you see we fail to hit all the legal targets for air quality which are established at EU level, with reference to WHO standards, you'll see why they probably prefer just not to mention it. They much prefer to stick to the kind of obesity and smoking causing ill health angle where they can place the onus on the individual to take action rather than the government. This is one of the major obstacles to progress in our awareness raising healthy air campaign.

Most of the 29,000 deaths are cardiovascular related but in addition to the strokes and heart attacks caused by poor air quality, there is also lung cancer and respiratory disease such as asthma and Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disorder (COPD) . Low birth weight is also associated with bad air quality and recently, there is very strong evidence coming from London Boroughs such as Tower Hamlets and Hackney that children growing up near busy roads are entering adulthood with smaller lungs and that is something they can't 'regain' in later life and it is a big predictor of life expectancy. We see that as really important, and sometimes people don't necessarily relate it to a figure of statistical deaths, because it isn't 29,000 dropping dead but it is 11.5 years of life lost per death. But something like smaller lungs in children, the public can respond to more.

The main cause of this air pollution is traffic and within that category diesel is by far the biggest problem. Diesel causes far, far higher levels of emissions and is the source of two of the most harmful pollutants, Nitrogen Dioxide and particulate matter which is very tiny particulates in the air which can penetrate deep into the lungs. The WHO declared diesel emissions carcinogenic last year, in recognition of the evidence for causation of lung cancer.

There is the issue of government policy actually pushing diesel, so in 2010 for the first time we had more diesel vehicles bought than non-diesel vehicles. And that's because of incentives through tax breaks. Things clearly are going in the wrong direction here.

Client Earth works from the EU level right down to community engagement in London. In the EU they are reviewing air quality policy and we are really concerned about our government's angle in these negotiations. They are lobbying for these legal limits to be weakened basically while CE think they need to be strengthened.

A recent WHO report stated that significant health impacts are happening even at the current legal air quality limits. We are not even reaching the legal limits in 40 out of 43 zones across the UK. We are failing to meet the legal limits for Nitrogen Dioxide. In 16 zones, which are mostly the biggest cities across the UK, we won't reach them until 2020, and in the case of London, not before 2025. The original deadline was 2010. So we are looking at 15 years of delay on this, yet everyone knew these deadlines had to be met, yet no one acted.

At Client Earth, because we are an environmental law organisation, we have taken DEFRA to court on its failure to meet these legal limits. It's been quite a long process, and has been going since 2010. It has gone through the High Court and then the Court of Appeal, but we didn't get good responses there, they referred to the European Commission being the ones that should be enforcing the law, which is technically wrong, legally speaking.

But we had a good result in May of this year, when the Supreme Court made a formal declaration that government are failing in their responsibilities to protect the public from the health effects of air pollution.

The problem is that it's a very complex legally speaking and they have had to refer some of more complex questions to the European Court of Justice which is going to take - even if we get expedition and the whole thing is speeded up - at least another year. But it does mean that the result will then impact all of the EU member states so it is quite exciting although we have to take the pace as it comes. They have also made a declaration that leaves the way open for national and European level enforcement. So that means there is the possibility of massive fines coming down from the EU Commission. Though that's not what we've been pushing for, we've been pushing for action above all else. That's what we are doing at the national level and at regional level we are doing some work to advocate particulate policies.

We would like low emission zones in every single large town and city in the UK, which would keep out the dirtiest vehicles. This is something that the government have evaluated and found to be the most cost effective method of reducing poor air quality yet they refuse to go ahead on the basis that it is too expensive for industry. By that they mean a particular kind of industry because it would actually boost the greener industries but they are always only interested in the *wrong* kind of industry as we know.

What we are doing with our healthy air campaign is to increase public awareness because that's the number one reason why government can get away with doing so little on this because no one really ask them about it. We have found that although people are starting to be aware they don't really feel empowered to doing anything about it, so one thing we are trying to spread is the awareness that even within London, even in the centre of London, you can do a lot to reduce your own personal exposure just by thinking about the way that you walk.

Kings College London did a study where they walked two different routes between Waterloo and the British Museum. One route was slightly longer but along quieter roads and they

found there was half the level of exposure to dangerous pollutants when people chose that route.

While you can't do that all the time, you have to be practical, it is worth thinking about staying off the main roads when you are not in a massive rush. We also do work with communities to map pollution in their areas, and mapping some of these routes. As Helen mentioned earlier these things like poor air quality are invisible, so it's really hard for people to relate to them, And particularly with air quality, as there are lots of reference points in history like the London smog's of the 1950's, we can't see smog like that anymore so obviously people think there's not a problem.

The UK government do help to keep this kind of attitude going. Everything produced by the government in relation to air quality starts with the premise that, in the 50's it was really bad but now we have pretty much got it sorted but unfortunately that's far from the case. So as well as encouraging people to reduce their own exposure and contributions to air pollution, we also encourage people to start to make a noise about it.

Because of the air quality review in the EU there is going to be a lot of opportunities here to put pressure on government. CE is going to be keeping an eye on the UK government and one of my colleagues will be working in Brussels from September because of this review.

There are a lot of resources on the Healthy Air campaign website www.healthyair.org.uk on how to put pressure on your MP, councillors and public health officials in your local authority to take action. Because despite the figures on the adverse health impacts from poor air quality, there is also blind spot in the health sector to acting on this issue.

But I feel when we approach certain bodies they have it in the back of their minds that maybe they should be doing something on this so we feel like we are pushing at an open door and that people know the evidence is really strong and that they should be acting, but without any pressure they are simple not going too.

So we are hoping to link up all the communities in the UK that are already interested in this issue and also the ones we are starting to encourage to be interested, so that we might have a bit of a coordinated push to pressure the government.

I declare that DEFRA is an organisation where cancer prevention does not live.