

July 8, 2004

Study shows Toronto's air pollution harms thousands of residents, Medical Officer of Health calls for action on air quality

Dr. Barbara Yaffe, Toronto's Acting Medical Officer of Health, today released a study estimating that five common air pollutants contribute to about 1,700 premature deaths and 6,000 hospital admissions in Toronto each year.

The estimates include chronic health effects associated with fine particles in the air and acute health effects associated with ozone, nitrogen dioxide, sulphur dioxide and carbon monoxide.

"These premature deaths and hospital admissions are preventable and likely would not have occurred when they did without the exposure to air pollution," said Dr. Yaffe.

The report cites studies around the world demonstrating that air pollution causes reduced lung function, asthma attacks, emergency room visits, lung cancer, high blood pressure and reduced life expectancy.

The Toronto data show that compared with 27 cities over a ten-year period, the city's nitrogen dioxide levels were the fourth highest, exceeded only by Los Angeles, Hong Kong and New York. Increases in nitrogen dioxide levels in Toronto coincided with increased vehicle use and a decline in use of public transit. The study identifies the city's transportation sector as the most significant source of air pollution.

The study estimates that in Toronto, exposure to fine particles in the air contributes to about 6,000 emergency room visits, 12,000 cases of childhood bronchitis and 72,000 days of asthma symptoms each year.

"Bad air reduces the quality of life for the city's children and adults, especially those who face a lifetime of chronic health problems made worse by air pollution," said Dr. Yaffe.

Dr. Yaffe also released a report prepared for the Board of Health recommending that the Ontario government be urged to implement a comprehensive action plan to address air pollution in Toronto, including the following five priorities:

- Provide sufficient funding to ensure the maintenance and expansion of public transit.
- Create an accountable agency to co-ordinate land-use and transportation planning across the Greater Toronto Area.
- Aggressively promote energy conservation, the development of renewable energy sources and co-generation with high efficiency natural gas.
- Enforce an industrial emissions reduction strategy through regulations that ensure compliance with Canada Wide Standards for ozone and fine particles, by 2010.
- Establish health-based air quality standards to drive improvements in air quality.

Media Contact: Mary Margaret Crapper, Toronto Public Health, 416-338-7873
