Aphekom Second Plenary Meeting in Vienna

Interviews performed by Geoff Davies, external communication expert

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Nino KUNZLI - CREAL, Barcelona, Spain, and Institute for Social and Preventive Medicine - Swiss Tropical Institute, Basel, Switzerland

WP4: Health Impacts and Policy: Novel Approaches

Geoff: Here with me now is Nino Kuenzli from Barcelona Centre for Research in Environmental Epidemiology CREAL and from the University of Basel who is leading a team tasked with identifying novel approaches to health impacts and policy.

Nino, you head the more research-oriented work package team. Would you like to comment on its aims and on the particular benefits you expect to deliver?

Nino: Our work package develops the methods and the tools to integrate the most recent air pollution research findings into the risk assessment. So far the assessment of the overall disease burden attributable to air pollution has left out these more recent findings and therefore we usually underestimate the size of the problem.

We think that the public and the policy makers have the right to know how big the problem really is and how much we could therefore benefit from better air quality.

So there are two most important more recent findings that are crucial in our work package. First, we try to also integrate the chronic effects of air pollution into the risk assessment. Recent studies from Europe and elsewhere indicate that the typical everyday exposure over long term to air pollution as it happens in normal life, that this would have effects on the chronic diseases, for example the new development of asthma or even atherosclerosis is now discussed.

The second point is that many studies compared the health of those living extremely close to busy roads with people living further away, and with further away from traffic I mean only some 100 meters away instead of living directly along these busy streets and street canyons.

These studies now indicate that those people living so close to streets have many more problems, health problems than those who don't live close to street canyons.

We also know from measurements done in the past few years that several of the most toxic and really nasty pollutants do occur at far higher concentrations along streets, for example the very tiny ultrafine particles. It can be some 5 to 10 times higher concentrations of these type of pollutants along the highways, along busy streets as compared to only 100 meters away.

We have never used this information in any European risk assessment as methods were not available. We do not even know currently how many people in the cities of Europe would live so close to heavy traffic roads within let's say 20 to 50 meters of busy roads. We know work on these methods and we will apply these methods and tools to a few Aphekom cities with sufficient data, such as for example Barcelona or Vienna and others.

This will provide a much clearer idea of where and how big the problem of traffic-related air pollution really is, and how much things could get better if we find solutions to these very prevailing European problems.

Geoff: Nino, thank you for your comments.