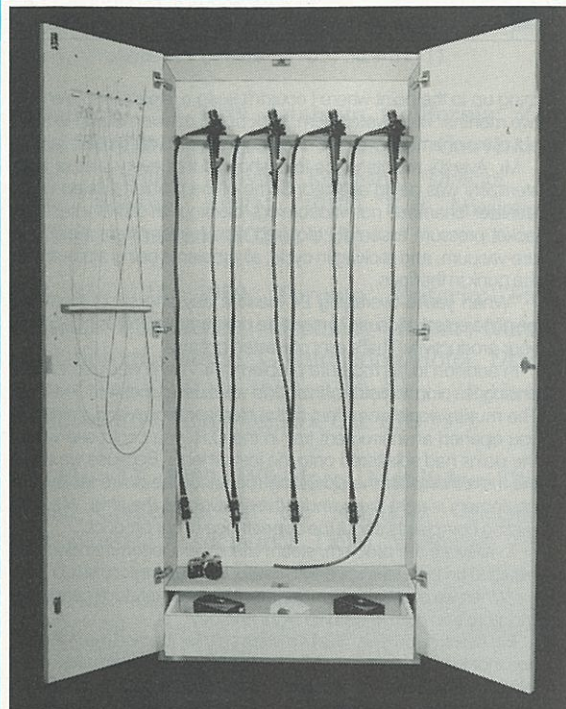


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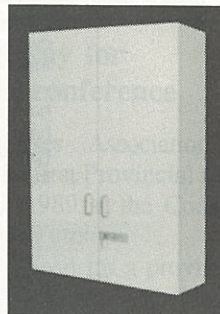


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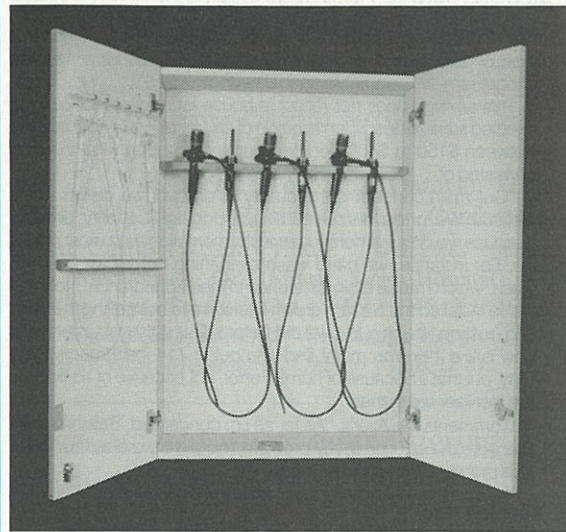
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Global pollution...

The consequences are ravaging the world's health

By editorial staff

The projected increase in the number of malignant melanoma cases resulting from the depletion of the stratospheric ozone layer* will be the least of the health problems facing the world, according to environmentalists.

Radical changes

At an international environment conference held in Toronto recently, experts discussed some of the consequences for health world-wide as a result of the unnatural and complex pollution-related changes that are ravaging the earth's atmosphere. Some of the health problems directly associated with radical atmospheric changes that conference speakers mentioned as emerging are:

- General systemic suppression of the human immune system;
- Increases in the incidence and distribution of infectious diseases;
- Severe respiratory difficulties;
- Heat-induced fatalities;
- Cataract development/subsequent blindness.

The pollution systems with the most potential for greatly increasing human health problems are:

- increases in tropospheric* ozone;
- increases in acid aerosols;
- stratospheric* ozone depletion;
- global warming and climate changes.

Dr. Lester Grant of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was one of the speakers at the International Conference held at the Toronto Convention Centre June 27 to 29. He recently finished a draft paper on the health effects associated with regional and global air pollution problems. This paper, which is being reviewed by the EPA, was summarized at the conference. The conference was called "The Changing Atmosphere, Implications for Global Security."

Dr. Grant said that the accumulation of tropospheric (surface level) ozone over urban areas is linked to respiratory problems ranging from severe transient effects to more chronic damaging exposures affecting lung function and the defence mechanisms of the pulmonary system.

Major symptoms

Even transient effects of surface-level ozone should not be dismissed as inconsequential, he said. "At high enough levels, they can seriously dis-

* Ozone - a form of oxygen (O₃) formed by the action of ultraviolet radiation on oxygen

* Troposphere - region of the atmosphere above the earth's surface (surface level)

* Stratosphere - region of the atmosphere beginning about 7 miles up with a ceiling of about 20 miles.

rupt normal work and social activities, or even require emergency medical attention."

The major symptoms associated with the transient effects of tropospheric or surface-level ozone are coughing, wheezing, intense chest pain during inhalation and shortness of breath. Because of ozone activity in the pulmonary system, particularly on the respiratory tract nerve reflexes, constriction of the airway takes place resulting in reduced oxygen flow to the lungs.

Depending on the exposure time to the ozone and the concentration, the effects can last up to many hours. The level of physical activity during the exposure is a major fact affecting dose-response relationships. Even lower ambient ozone levels, for example, can cause respiratory problems.

In discussing the chronic effects associated with ozone pollution, he mentioned airway inflammatory responses, slowed lung development, slowed muscle ciliary clearance and impaired or lost macrophage function. Macrophage function involves the reticuloendothelial system which, when properly functioning, assists in the elimination of worn out cells, especially red blood cells. It is also involved in the repair of injured tissue, and in defense mechanisms, both local and general, of the body.

The surface-level ozone or "urban smog" that cause these health problems come from such sources as hydroelectric power plants, coal-fueled industrial complexes, petrochemical facilities and cars, trucks and other transportation vehicles.

Dr. Grant, who serves as an international advisor on air pollution issues for the World Health Organization, said that millions of people in many countries are exposed to ozone levels at concentrations associated with the adverse health effects just described. He said that tropospheric ozone is a greenhouse gas that also contributes to warming and climate change. As well, it can facilitate the formation of acid aerosols which also effect respiratory function.

Suppressed immune system

Acidic particles suspended in the air or absorbed into water droplets to form acid fogs come from the combustion of sulphur-containing fossil fuels. The acid sulphates, especially sulphuric acid, are of most concern. These sulphates are of various sizes, some of which are small enough to deposit themselves deep in the respiratory tract where, depending on the site of deposition, can exert its effects in all regions of the respiratory system.

"Theoretically," Dr. Grant says, "deposition in the

upper tracheo-bronchial region would be associated with pulmonary function effects, whereas deeper deposition would likely affect lung function and defence mechanisms. Mucous ciliary clearance of particles, especially sulphuric acid particles, is clearly affected.

Recently, both Canadian and U.S. environmental protection agencies have recommended that acid aerosols be listed as pollutant agents for government regulation.

"Future stratospheric ozone depletion and the global warming phenomena is projected to exacerbate acid aerosols and tropospheric ozone formation and their associated health and environmental effects," says Dr. Grant.

Recently, the popular focus of the stratospheric ozone barrier becoming depleted has been on the increased incidence of skin cancer. According to Dr. Grant there are other more serious health implications that this issue.

Greater serious health threat

"Immune suppression and the potential from this for an increased incidence of varied infections may ultimately be recognized as a more serious health threat than the better known skin cancer problem."

Ozone depletion due to emissions of chlorofluorocarbons, halons and other trace gases results in increased ultraviolet-B radiation (UV-B) reaching the earth's surface. It is this increased UV-B radiation

Studies suggest ultraviolet rays could activate the AIDS virus in carriers

According to a Canadian Press report, recent studies indicating direct sunlight may activate the AIDS virus should be taken seriously, a University of Saskatchewan researcher says.

"I think there's something there," microbiologist Dr. Louis Qualtiere said. "If the virus is present, environmental influences or infectious agents may trigger its activity."

Studies by U.S. researchers suggest direct sunlight or the ultraviolet rays of the sun may be a catalyst in transforming the AIDS virus from a latent or dormant state, into an active, replicating and harmful state.

When infected cell cultures containing the AIDS virus were exposed to ultraviolet light, activity of the human immunodeficiency virus that transmits AIDS increased 50 to 150 times. ■

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which has most commonly been linked to increased incidence of skin cancer. It is the nonmelanoma skin cancers which to date have been most clearly linked to the UV-B increase.

A 1% decrease in stratospheric ozone is projected to cause a 2% increase in surface UV-B radiation and an associated 4% to 6% increase in basal and squamous cell carcinomas. Both are nonmelanoma cancers. With this level of depletion (1% to 2%) of the ozone, it is estimated that this will cause between 7 and 10,000 new cases of these types of skin cancer per year in Canada. Most susceptible will be light-skinned caucasians living in higher latitudes. Canada is in the higher latitudes.

As Dr. Grant explained, the more extensive and critical damage from the increased radiation may be to the immune system's increased vulnerability to infection in the body.

Vector borne

Global temperature rises and shifts in moisture patterns are presently affecting the geographic distribution of vector borne diseases - diseases where the infectious microbial agent is transmitted by other agents: mosquitoes, fleas, ticks, rats, etc.

As well as affecting the geographical spread of these diseases, the pollution-related climate changes could increase the growth rate of the infectious agent and the carrier, and the biting rate of the carrier. These conditions would then greatly increase the human incidence of exposure to a host of vector borne infectious diseases.

Pathogens and toxic chemicals

With the likely rise in sea levels due to the global warming trend, the spread of infectious diseases will

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be further enhanced. Dr. Grant explains: "Sea level rises would result in more frequent storm surges and flooding of coastal areas. The resulting inundation of sewage lines and sewage treatment plants in populated areas may result in the spread of various pathogens as well as other effects secondary to flooding... Pathogens from coastal garbage dumps or toxic chemicals from flooded disposal sites could be spread through populated areas in the region."

"This may lead to general systemic suppression of the immune function, making people more susceptible to a variety of diseases." He added that the opportunity for these diseases to occur may increase as a result of global warming and climate change phenomena.

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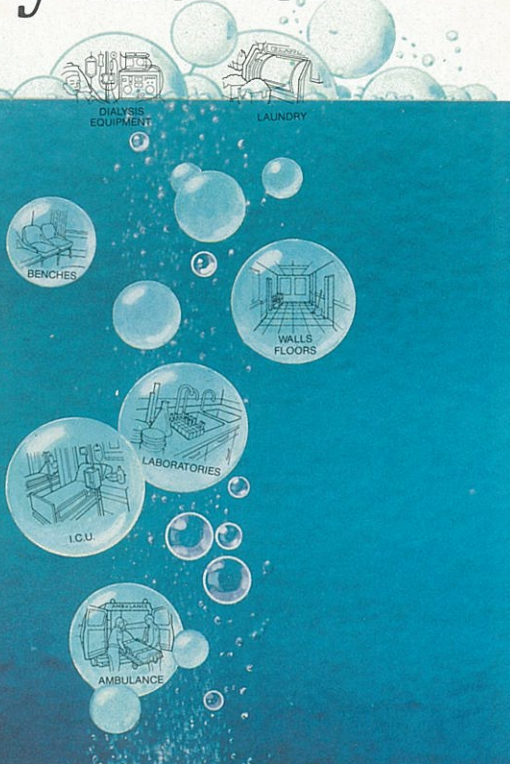
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