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Parliamentary Assembly

Assemblée parlementaire

Recommendation 1863 (2009) ¹

Environment and health: better prevention of environment-related health hazards

1. The Parliamentary Assembly, like other international organisations such as the European Union, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the European Environment Agency, notes that there are increasing links between environmental pollution and ever greater and more obvious health risks. Environment-related pathologies are not confined to respiratory and cardiovascular diseases or specific types of cancer, but include other chronic and emerging pathologies such as immune system impairment, neurological and neurodegenerative illnesses and disruptions of the hormonal and reproductive system.

2. Since embryos, foetuses, neonates and children are even more sensitive to environmental factors than adults, the Assembly alerts all governments and all the responsible organisations and stakeholders to the need to protect or restore a healthy environment and thus guarantee the future of our children and future generations.

3. The Assembly has repeatedly stressed the importance of states' commitment to preserving the environment and environmental health as set out in many conferences, charters, conventions, declarations and protocols since the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment and the Stockholm Declaration (Stockholm, 1972). It more particularly welcomes the research efforts and action plans launched since the WHO-Europe Fourth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health (Budapest, 2004).

4. The Assembly nevertheless regrets that, despite calls for the precautionary principle and despite all the recommendations, declarations and a number of statutory and legislative advances, there is still a lack of reaction to known or emerging environmental and health risks and the virtually systematic delays in adopting and implementing effective preventive measures. There has thus been little improvement in the situation of multiple and chronic exposure to multiform pollution and environmental pathologies are still as worrying as ever.

5. In the light of the known results of scientific expertise in this field, it considers that the political authorities must act in order to prevent disease and health crises.

6. The Assembly stresses the importance of all forms of prevention and early detection where environmental health policy is concerned, and believes that, above all, primary prevention of environmental risks must be encouraged.

7. Risk assessment must be based solely on scientific criteria, which means that it must be shielded from any kind of pressure exerted by the political authorities or economic lobbies, and must take account of the often insidious effects of chronic exposure to low or very low doses of a range of pollutants working in combination. Even in small doses, a cocktail of pollutants in the air, water, food and in everyday consumer products, and also in building materials (such as asbestos), can have a serious effect on human health.

8. Such assessment must above all take account of the fact that it is not only the dose that makes the poison but also the period of exposure, the accumulative mechanisms and individual sensitivities to pollutants or mixtures of pollutants.

9. For over twenty years, scientists, field doctors and environmental physicians, as well as experts and environmental specialists, have been alerting the public authorities and medical circles to the new health risks and environmental pathologies arising out of the insidious increase in pollution in all environments, in the food chain and in the human organism itself.

10. The Assembly acknowledges the primordial role played by civil society and

associations working to protect the environment and environmental health in terms not only of sounding the alarm and denouncing health scandals but also of producing preventive strategies and action plans.

11. Faced with the increasing risks to the environment, wildlife and human health, particularly that of future generations, the Assembly supports the research efforts being made at European and international levels to assess, with the requisite degree of certainty, the impact of low doses of chemical pollutants and ionising and non-ionising radiation on human health.

12. The Assembly takes note of the fact that in the environmental health field, all the players, including toxicologists, epidemiologists and environmental physicians, agree that environmental pollution has a negative impact on human health and advocate improving the prevention of health disorders linked to such pollution. Environmental medicine is a new transverse medical discipline which has been emerging and developing for a number of years.

13. The Assembly notes that the number of individuals actually suffering from diseases linked to the environment is regularly growing, in an increasingly disturbing manner.

14. Stressing the need for urgent practical action to curb the increase in known or emerging risks, the Assembly asks the Committee of Ministers to invite member and observer states of the Council of Europe to:

14.1. recognise the close links between the environment and health and to provide co-ordinated, strong policies in this area;

14.2. promote the positive health effects of access to a good quality environment and recognise the negative health effects that may result from poor environmental quality. This should be reflected in the national public health document, which each member state should submit to the Council of Europe Secretariat;

14.3. apply the precautionary principle in order to prevent major and dramatic health crises in the future caused by environmental risk factors;

14.4. ensure that scientific experts can work in an independent, transparent and democratic manner in accordance with the principles of adversarial and pluridisciplinary research;

14.5. guarantee the application of transparent criteria in the choice of the different experts and to improve their status, as well as to enhance the protection of whistle-blowers;

14.6. support actively the participation of civil society in public adversarial debates on present and future technological choices, challenges and acceptable risk levels ("impact assessment");

14.7. intensify urgently and substantially the efforts to devise a global policy for preventing chronic diseases associated with the environment, as well as environmental health-policy action plans, as an incentive for the sustainable and ecologically responsible restructuring of all fields of political and human activity;

14.8. adopt prevention policies in all fields, in terms of consumer food production and processing and service development, in order to foster the development of a new health protection-oriented economy;

14.9. establish a clear communication channel between member states on the health risks of pollution. This will enable the public to make up their own minds about the impact of the environment on their health, and make choices to improve their own health;

14.10. contribute actively to the establishment and reinforcement of a more responsible chemical production policy, by withdrawing from the market all carcinogenic, mutagenic, reprotoxic and neurotoxic substances, implementing a firm substitution policy and encouraging industrialists (by means of tax and financial measures) to move on to safer, less polluting products;

14.11. support organic agriculture and regulate agricultural production methods which use fewer pesticides, develop less polluting modes of energy production, reduce the impact on health of road traffic and promote a building policy that takes account of the impact of construction and building materials on health;

14.12. take account of the warnings of the European Environment Agency regarding electromagnetic pollution and specific health risks attributed to mobile phone systems;

14.13. foster measures, in their prevention programmes or action plans, to train and educate people in environmental health risks at all levels of society, and to develop exchanges between experts and citizens as well as between physicians and patients;

14.14. recognise environmental medicine as a new transverse medical discipline and develop harmonised initial and further training programmes for students and physicians at European level;

14.15. reinforce and ensure the general implementation, in connection with the problem of pollution inside houses or buildings, of the "green ambulance" system (mobile laboratories analysing homes and buildings at the request of the individuals concerned, in liaison with their family doctors, and the intervention and expertise of indoor environment counsellors), and to provide new types of training courses for medical advisers on the interior environment;

14.16. improve provision, through better reimbursement of diagnostic and therapeutic expenses, for persons suffering from illnesses associated with the environment, who often face major protracted suffering, and large medical bills;

14.17. support actively, by means of subsidies, contracts and partnership agreements, patients' associations working in the field of environmental health and diseases associated with the environment.

15. The Assembly asks the Committee of Ministers to instruct a committee of experts to elaborate a draft recommendation based on the elements above.

1. *Text adopted by the Standing Committee, acting on behalf of the Assembly, on 13 March 2009 (see [Doc. 11788](#), report of the Committee on the Environment, Agriculture and Local and Regional Affairs, rapporteur: Mr Huss; and opinion of the Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee, rapporteur: Mr Hancock).*