confounders, including reduction in passive smoke or mite allergen exposure, which could explain the improvement in respiratory symptoms. These types of study are extremely difficult, expensive and time consuming, but also virtually impossible to blind. Patient reporting bias could explain the soft positive outcomes, especially in conjunction with the low follow-up rate (6 months ~55%, 12 months ~75%). Even if the study is accepted as supporting mould control, we do not know which component of mould control is effective (removal, or fungicide, or increased ventilation, or perhaps all three combined). Or perhaps improving ventilation and reducing humidity is a good thing for respiratory health whatever the mechanism?

The answer to this question has been the subject of a truly landmark study from New Zealand16 which studied 1350 non-insulted homes with low income families. The houses were generally stand-alone wooden homes on piles, with heating of a living room only. Two-thirds of homes had damp and three-quarters had visible mould. The homes had at least one household member with respiratory symptoms in the last year or a history of asthma, pneumonia or chest infections. Homes were randomised to have ceiling insulation installed, draught stopping around windows and doors, and moisture impenetrable barriers fitted below the floors (cost £700/house) or to control. Over 12 months there were substantial (of the order of 50%) improvements in self-rated health, wheezing and reduced time off work and school in the intervention group, with fewer visits to GP and hospital. Visible mould was reduced by 50%. Again it is impossible to fully blind this study, but it was single blind and the size of the study and the size of improvements for a mix of hard and soft outcomes give it great weight. Essentially, the authors have identified an important and cost effective public health intervention. Whether it works by reducing mould exposure or whether mould is a bystander of housing quality is an open question.

So there is the challenge for any society with a social conscience. The New Zealand study needs to be reproduced around the world, accounting for local housing conditions and climate, to see if the results are transferable. In New Zealand the intervention not only improves respiratory health in a vulnerable part of society, it actually saves them money. Overall heating costs went down by 20%, and that can’t be bad for that other big environmental challenge—outdoor climate change!

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Correspondence to: Dr Ashley Woodcock, University of Manchester, South Manchester University Hospital Foundation Trust, Manchester M23 9LT, UK; ashley.a.woodcock@manchester.ac.uk

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Vitamin D and asthma

Maternal diet vs lack of exposure to sunlight as the cause of the epidemic of asthma, allergies and other autoimmune diseases

Scott T Weiss, Augusto A Litonjua

Role of vitamin D deficiency in allergic and autoimmune diseases

Asthma is occurring in epidemic proportions with more than 300 million affected subjects worldwide. In almost all cases the disease has its onset in early childhood, with 80–90% of all cases initially being diagnosed before the age of 6 years.1 2

It was not always so. In the early 1970s the prevalences of asthma and allergy were roughly half of what they are today, and although the onset of the asthma epidemic started insidiously and cannot be precisely documented, it had several interesting and important features that defined a unified explanation until now. There is clearly a North/South equatorial gradient with Western industrialised countries furthest away from the equator (New Zealand, Australia, the UK) having the highest prevalence worldwide. There is also a clear urban/rural gradient among poorer Third World countries, and a First (industrialised) World/Third World gradient with the lowest asthma prevalence occurring in rural areas in Third World societies. A very important feature of the epidemic is that it is not only asthma that has increased. A host of

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other autoimmune diseases—such as multiple sclerosis, type 1 diabetes and Crohn’s disease—have all increased dramatically as well. So it is not just Th2 diseases like asthma, allergic rhinitis, eczema and food allergy that have increased, but also Th1 autoimmune diseases. Less directly connected to the epidemic is the seasonal gradient in incidence with a peak in the late winter/early spring. Finally, in the USA the asthma epidemic seems worse among the urban poor, particularly among minorities (African-Americans and Puerto Ricans).

One of the theories to explain these disparate epidemiological findings is the hygiene hypothesis, which posits that the decrease in early childhood infections leads to “missing immune deviation” from a predominantly Th2 to a more balanced Th1/Th2 immune response, eventually resulting in allergic disorders. However, the hygiene hypothesis fails to explain all the features noted above, such as the parallel rise in Th1 autoimmune diseases and the fact that children most at risk for asthma are also most susceptible to respiratory infections. A more plausible explanation is that changes in diet and lifestyle (particularly time spent indoors) have fuelled the epidemic.

Since the first paper published on the subject in 1990, a large number of studies have been performed linking diet to respiratory disease in both adults and children. In 1997, one of us (Weiss) suggested, at a CIBA symposium meeting, that maternal dietary deficiencies of vitamin E and vitamin D are contributing to the epidemic of autoimmune disease as well (see page 773). Certainly, the available data, randomised controlled trials of vitamin E in pregnant women are indicated.

Given these important results, what needs to be done next? First, measurement of actual vitamin D levels during pregnancy and in cord blood and determining their relationship to subsequent wheezing in birth cohort studies can easily be done. Measuring levels directly, rather than estimating intake from food frequency questionnaires, will be more reliable since levels will integrate sun exposure as well as supplement use to assess exposure accurately. Second, the two confirmatory observational birth cohort studies are enough to suggest an intervention trial of vitamin D supplements to prevent the development of immune-mediated disorders, particularly asthma. Such a trial has currently been submitted for funding and is awaiting review in the USA. While the postnatal effects of vitamin D on immune function are clear, its effects on immune development are not. More needs to be known about the mechanisms by which vitamin D, vitamin E and other nutrients influence fetal development. This is the province of epigenetics and genetic programming of the fetus and should be done in mouse models. In our view, this line of research can have major public health implications that go beyond respiratory disease and influence everything from childhood infection in the Third World to type 1 diabetes and inflammatory bowel disease in industrialised societies.

Vitamin D deficiency is the single most important dietary deficiency in the world today. It has already been linked to prostate cancer, colon cancer and breast cancer. After almost 35 years of increases in allergic and autoimmune disease, we are beginning to understand the causes of the epidemic. Much more research is needed, but the way seems clear to rapidly improve human health in a number of areas once the appropriate studies are done.
Air pollution and human health

Air pollution, human health, climate change and you

George Thurston

The “co-benefits” of reducing air pollution on climate change and human health

The study by Ko et al.1 in this issue of Thorax (see page 780) provides an important new contribution to the growing body of evidence that the severe adverse health effects of air pollution, so well documented in Europe and North America, are also occurring in Asia. Indeed, a recent report by the Health Effects Institute (HEI) surveyed the available published literature on this topic as part of its Public Health and Air Pollution in Asia-Science Access on the Net (PAPA-SAN) study. They found hundreds of published studies showing adverse health effects of air pollution in Asia and summarised the results on the web (http://www.healthyeffects.org/Asia/papas-an-home.htm). These results show that a wide range of health effects are significantly associated with air pollution exposures in Asia, including studies of respiratory and cardiovascular morbidity and mortality in a number of cities across Asia. In fact, the HEI report identified 69 published studies of the effects of air pollution on the health of populations in Mainland China, 16 in Hong Kong, 56 in Taipei, China, 8 in Indonesia, 2 in Malaysia, 6 in Singapore, 13 in Thailand, 30 in India, 46 in Japan and 33 in South Korea. The study by Ko et al.1 now adds to this knowledge by identifying a susceptible population not studied extensively before in Asia—people suffering from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, the fifth largest cause of death in Hong Kong.

Clearly, there is a large body of studies documenting an ever widening range of adverse health effects of air pollution in Asia. As summarised in the HEI report, the increased cardiopulmonary risks found in Asia are similar in magnitude, per amount of pollution, to the relative risks found in other parts of the world.2 But the importance of these increased risks for illness, hospital admissions and mortality are much greater than in Europe or North America because the levels of air pollution in Asia are usually so much higher. For example, the populations of Hong Kong and New York City are both about 8 million, but the annual average concentration of particulates with an aerodynamic diameter <2.5 μm (PM2.5) in Hong Kong, as reported by Ko et al.1, is nearly triple that found in New York (36 μg/m3 vs approximately 14 μg/m3). And, as shown in fig 1, Hong Kong has among the cleanest air of Asian cities. Air pollution represents a major, and growing, public health problem in Asia. Indeed, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has estimated that urban air pollution contributes each year to approximately 800 000 deaths and 4.6 million lost life-years worldwide.3 As the population and economic activity of Asia grows, and as the migration of residents from the rural countryside to the cities accelerates, the outdoor air pollution health problems will continue to worsen unless measures are taken to reduce emissions of air pollutants by industrial, motor vehicle and fossil fuel combustion sources.

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Scott T Weiss and Augusto A Litonjua

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