

Toxic fumes threaten our children. We have to take on the pollution lobby

The Guardian, Wed 9 Jan 2019, George Monbiot

Imagine that you could buy, in shops across the country, canisters containing toxic gas. Imagine that some people walked the streets, squirting this gas into the face of every child they passed. Imagine that it became a craze, so that a child couldn't walk a metre without receiving a faceful. Imagine that, while a single dose was unlikely to cause serious harm, repeated doses damaged their hearts, lungs and brains, affecting their health, their intelligence and their life chances.

It would be treated as a national emergency. Sales of the canisters would immediately be banned. The police would be mobilised. If existing laws against poisoning children were deemed insufficient, new legislation would be rushed through parliament. It's not hard to picture this response, is it? Yet the mass poisoning is happening. And nothing changes.

According to a paper in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, burning fossil fuels is now "the world's most significant threat to children's health". Their life chances are compromised before they are born. Toxic particles from exhaust fumes pass through the lungs of pregnant women and accumulate in the placenta. The risk of premature birth and low birth weight this causes is described in the *British Medical Journal* as "something approaching a public health catastrophe".

Among the likely impacts of repeated poisoning, researchers now believe, is a "huge reduction" in intelligence. A paper published last year found that "long-term exposure to air pollution impedes cognitive performance in verbal and math tests". Pollution stunts the growth of lungs as well as minds, raising the risk of asthma, cancer, stroke and heart failure.

How will this affect the Diesel Generation: in other words, those born since 2001? Given that researchers have found an association between air pollution and childhood mental illness, could this help explain the rising prevalence of psychiatric disorders among English children since the first major survey, in 1999? A study conducted in London suggests that people with the highest exposure to pollution also have a greater risk of developing dementia. Might we have triggered a dementia timebomb, that could explode in 40 or 50 years?

The only difference between the absurd scenario with which this article began and reality is intent: no one means to poison children with their exhaust fumes. But the absence of a *mens rea* makes no difference to their health. The one-tonne metal canisters are still on sale (though the number bought has dipped slightly in the past year) and toxic gas is pumped into our children's faces with every step they take. Especially on the way to and from school. These are the times at which children inhale the most particulates (especially if they are driven – exposure is much greater inside a car than on the pavement). Horrifying recent data also reveals that pollutants from nearby roads accumulate in classrooms, leading to higher levels inside than out. Due to the continued failure of successive governments to address this crisis, taking children to school damages their minds.

After the Lancet commission on pollution and health reported, in 2017, that pollution kills more people than tobacco – and three times as many as Aids, tuberculosis and malaria combined – you might have hoped that governments, development agencies and health charities would have made it a priority. But they remain focused on communicable disease, while ignoring the greater, manmade threat. Where is Save the Children? Where is Médecins Sans Frontières? Where are the philanthropists seeking to eliminate deaths from ambient air pollution, as Bill and Melinda Gates and others seek to wipe out malaria? (...)