

HEALTH RISKS FROM INDOOR AIR POLLUTION :
THE QUESTION OF NEWSWORTHINESS

by John Caldwell

Many years ago my brother's St Bernard dog, who was in every way a delightful creature but who suffered from an irrational fear of sudden loud noise, jumped through a first floor window during a thunder storm and fractured his pelvis. After overcoming the difficulties of transporting 70Kg of shocked dog for treatment to a nearby canine hospital, my brother telephoned to tell me the sad saga. After responding suitably with gasps of horror and long-drawn-out sighs, it suddenly occurred to me that here was a marketable news story. I could picture the headlines: "TERRIFIED ST BERNARD DOG LEAPS FROM FIRST FLOOR WINDOW". Surely, I thought, that's worth a bob or two. But it's the next chapter of this story that makes it relevant to this newsletter. My brother duly telephoned one of the more sensational newspapers (Trollope would doubtless have dubbed it the "Jupiter") only to be greeted by a rather jaded reporter with "St Bernard, did you say? - no, we're not interested. We ran a story on a St Bernard last week. Now if it had been a Great Dane or an Irish Wolfhound, we might have been able to run it". So as not to leave you in the air about the important issues, let me hasten to tell you that in due course the dog made an excellent recovery and his hospital bills were paid for by the "Daily Rag" in return for two moderately apochryphal sob-stories.

But why is this relevant to the IAI? I will tell you. We members of IAI are a bunch of rather serious-minded scientists bent on learning the truth about the risks to health, such as they are, from indoor air pollution.

Now, it is easy enough to recognise a health risk if one gets a stinking cold from someone else's careless sneeze, but even a bad cold which progresses to pneumonia is not newsworthy. Even death from carbon monoxide poisoning is rarely newsworthy. It simply has to be the "right breed of dog" which dies. When it comes to much more slowly operating health risks as, for example, lung cancer risk from the inhalation of asbestos fibres, or to radon, a wholly different set of factors determine newsworthiness. In such cases, no-one can confidently point to any particular case of death from lung cancer and say this was caused by exposure to low levels of asbestos fibres or to radon in the home. The possibility or probability of causation by these agents is all in the mind of the epidemiologist who in turn is reliant on doom-and-gloom theorists who tell him that risk is in some way proportional to dose down to one inhaled fibre, or to one DNA-damaging atom of radon. How is it that such armchair scientists can so frequently capture the headlines with mere conjectures, while we down-to-earth, practical scientists know that too little is known for one to be able to establish that there are any health risks - let alone calculate what they are - from low levels of exposure to anything? How is it that we who know that scientifically-based methods do not exist for distinguishing between "very low risk" and "no risk" allow our selves to be bombarded with headlines such as "X THOUSAND LUNG CANCER DEATHS PER YEAR FROM RADON"; "Y THOUSAND LUNG CANCER DEATHS PER YEAR FROM OTHER PEOPLE'S TOBACCO SMOKE" etc, when we know there can be no solid scientific basis for such statements?

There seem to be two reasons. Firstly, although people, generally, do not understand mathematical expressions of risk, they do have a concept of what is a "big number" and what is a "small number". Big numbers are far more newsworthy than small ones. Almost any number over 100 associated with an alleged cancer risk has a fair chance of being considered newsworthy. Secondly, we have to be talking about the right sort of dog. King Edward VI put appendicitis on the map by having the grace to suffer from it. A collection of 99 cases of appendicitis in a bunch of lesser mortals would probably have been regarded as wholly un-newsworthy - but one King with the disease and the press goes mad!

From all this we may deduce that if we want the true science underlying IAI's interests to flourish, we need to understand the rules of newsworthiness. If we want to draw attention to what we feel are serious risks, then we need to choose the 'right breed of dog' and talk in terms of 'big numbers'. Furthermore, a precise number carries much more weight than a vague number. Walt Disney knew his onions of course. A prospective headline with worldwide potential would be "101 DALMATIANS IN DEATH LEAP".

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