Environment and health: integrated strategy, SCALE initiative, first cycle 2004-2010

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PURPOSE : to put in place a strategy to reduce diseases linked to environmental factors. CONTENT : this report states that there is a strong link between poor health and environmental problems. Moreover, a report from the European Environmental Agency, EEA, shows that as many as 60 000 deaths per year in large European cities are caused by long-term exposure to air pollution. Children are more exposed to environmental risks than adults. One child in seven is affected by asthma. In order to reverse this alarming trend the European Commission is today launching A European Environment and Health Strategy. With this new strategy the Commission expects to achieve a better understanding of the complex relationship between environment and health and to identify and reduce diseases caused by environmental factors. The strategy is known as SCALE and relies on five key elements: - Science : it will be based on Science to broaden our perspective on the often very complex link between environment and health. Traditionally, environmental assessments and policy action have focused on single pollutants in single environmental compartments, such as air, water or soil. There is, however,a strong need to look into how different pollutant react together. There is a need to understand better how pollutants move in the environment and how we come in contact with them - through air, water, food, and consumer products. The Commission needs to understand how the human body reacts, over a period of time, to the continuous exposure to different pollutants, inter-acting between each others, often at a low level. - Children : focus shall be on Children since they are particularly vulnerable to environmental hazards. There are 157 million children in Europe. Most of them live in urban areas with particular environmental problems that must be addressed. The Commission will be launching pilot actions on pollutants with specific relevance to children, including dioxins, heavy metals and endocrine disrupters (chemicals that affect the hormone system). Together with the World Health Organization, WHO, and the EU Member States, the Commission will establish indicators and bio-monitoring systems that will help us better to understand where, how and why children are affected. - Awareness : awareness of environmental-health problems should be raised and solutions to how they can be solved. Citizens have the right to know about these problems, in particular those affecting children. Policy-makers and stakeholders from both the environmental and health sector must increase their efforts to communicate, both across the sectors and with the citizens. - Legal instrument : the EU Legislation will complement national and international initiatives. It will be reviewed to reflect the special situation and needs of children. - Evaluation : all actions taken under the strategy will be Evaluated continuously. There will be a need to verify how effective they are in reducing environmental-related health problems. A constant evaluation will also allow us to address new problems as they emerge. The European Environment and Health Strategy will be implemented in cycles. The first cycle, 2004 - 2010, will focus on four health effects: - Childhood respiratory diseases, asthma, allergies; - Neurodevelopment disorders; - Childhood cancer; - Endocrine disrupting effects. The detailed actions of the strategy will be prepared based on extensive consultations with experts and stakeholders from the environment, health and research fields in all parts of the enlarged Europe. A first stakeholder meeting will take place on 11 July in Brussels to launch the consultations. Working groups covering the priority health effects and monitoring activities will be set up and participate in three regional conferences during Autumn 2003. The work will emanate in an Action Plan for the period 2004-2010, which the Commission will adopt in spring 2004. The Action Plan will be presented prior to the Inter-Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health in Budapest in June 2004, focusing particularly on children's health and environment.