

HOT AIR

Coming Up For Air

by Ann Berman

[Lawyers] argued that...GASP [Group Against Smog and Pollution] did not have a direct financial interest in the proceedings involving Duquesne Light's...request [to delay compliance with clean air regulations.]

Clean Air, by Charles O. Jones, a book on the politics of pollution in Pittsburgh, PA, 1970-71

Imagine you're snorkeling. You're swimming along with your head underwater. You're wearing your mask with the flexible tube and mouthpiece attached so you can breathe. Except that your breathing-tube, instead of being 2" in diameter, is the size of a straw. A straw? How are you going to get enough air? Panicked? Now you know what it's like to have asthma.

You don't have to imagine snorkeling. You could just ask a young neighbor. Asthma is the most prevalent chronic disease among US children, says the Center for Disease Control. But asthma isn't limited to children. The American Lung Association's statistics for New Haven County show that while 3% of children have asthma, 6% of adults do. Although asthma affects certain groups of people differently, in general it does not regard age, sex, ethnicity, or even cash. Fairfield County, CT's richest, has the same prevalence of asthma as New Haven County.

Asthma is an inflammation of the airways. At least 20 environmental triggers set it off—Fluffy the cat, diesel fumes, paint, dusty rugs, viruses, smog, etc. Mild inflammation may cause only a cough, while severe inflammation can block the airway entirely. (More than 5000 people in

the US die each year from asthma attacks.) In between these extremes, asthma may cause wheezing, shortness of breath, chest pain, or the panicky feeling of breathing through a straw.

According to Dr. Michelle Cloutier, chair of the American Lung Association of CT and pediatrics professor at UConn, all countries in the world have been experiencing large increases in asthma since 1990. So scientists have stepped up research into its underlying cause. A prime suspect is ground-level ozone. Ozone is a nasty brew of organic and industrial fumes, activated by sunlight. If ozone is the culprit, though, wouldn't the gradually improving air quality in developed countries make asthma rates go down? The question is still open. Nonetheless, pulmonary experts reported in Science recently that they've found a smoking gun. Experiments with infant monkeys show that ozone exposure causes permanent structural changes in developing airways and their nerves, making lung tissue more reactive to triggers.

Residents of Milford, then, can find a direct trail of causes leading from asthma, to ozone, to ozone-forming chemical reactions, to automobile exhaust along I-95, to the Devon power plant's emissions, and, finally, to the Sooty Six. Sure—we can manage asthma by eliminating some triggers: cleaning house, putting Fluffy out, and staying inside on days when the Air Quality Index is unhealthy. But Milford has had over a month of “danger” days every year since 1996, and no county in CT meets federal Clean Air standards for ozone! Even if we aren't all asthma patients, our bodies can't be helped by air pollution. How much can any individual do to stay healthy when our air is so bad? We need assistance. Recently, our legislators voted to clean up the Sooty Six. Thank you! But Governor Rowland is wondering about signing the bill. Let's send him a statement—a little symbol—a straw.