

Silent killer strikes at peak hour

November 18 2013

It's official - air pollution causes cancer and a QUT researcher is calling on Australian policymakers to do more to save lives.

The World Health Organization has reclassified outdoor air pollution as carcinogenic to humans, after their International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) concluded there was enough evidence to show it caused lung cancer and increased risks of bladder cancer.

Quoted in the latest edition of *Medical Journal of Australia*, QUT Faculty of Health Associate Professor Adrian Barnett said the reclassification was a wake-up call to the Australian government.

"There is a generally complacent attitude to [air quality](#) in Australia, which is based on our air being cleaner than other countries, such as China, and the fact that most [air pollutants](#) are invisible and odourless," Professor Barnett was quoted as saying in the *Medical Journal of Australia's* November edition. "But just because we can't see the pollutants doesn't mean they aren't harming us. A lack of any serious policy action has meant that there's been no clear improvement in air quality in the last decade in Australia's major cities for the two important air pollutants of ozone and [particulate matter](#). Traffic is the major source of pollution in Australian cities, so if we want cleaner air then we either need cleaner cars or fewer cars."

Professor Barnett said it was important to bring the issue to the attention of the public through publications such as the MJA.

"Australia is relatively clean compared with other countries, but there are places in Australia that will have dangerously high levels of pollutants at times. For example, a busy intersection in the city," he said.

"Air pollution is a complex mix (or soup) of toxins. Some of the more prevalent ones are nitrogen dioxide, ozone, [carbon monoxide](#) and particulate matter, and all of these have been associated with [negative health effects](#).

"An article in last year's *European Respiratory Journal* identified ozone and particulate matter as the two of greatest concern. That's worrying for Australia as these are two pollutants that have remained at constant levels over the last decade, whereas other pollutants, such as carbon monoxide, have decreased over time.

"Clean air is vitally important for health and any new project or infrastructure that makes the air less clean needs to be very carefully examined. We need action on specific dirty sites, but we also need action on common sources such as vehicles which create most of the pollution in our cities."

However, he said there were actions people could take to reduce the impact of pollution.

"Avoiding rush hour is probably the biggest thing that the average Australian could do to lower their exposure," he said.

"Sitting in congested traffic is one of the surest ways to get a high dose of pollution. Walking or cycling along quieter backstreets is another option that also has other health benefits.

"The other bit of advice is keeping yourself healthy and fit in general, as those who suffer from the effects of air pollution are often those with a

weakened cardiovascular or respiratory system."

The IRAC report [Air Pollution and Cancer](#) reviewed the latest scientific literature to make the reclassification. The IRAC also separately examined findings surrounding particulate matter - a major component of air pollution - and concluded that it was also a "Group 1" carcinogen to humans. It also concluded that the findings apply to "all regions of the world", no matter the composition of that area's pollution.

More information: [www.mja.com.au/careers/199/9/t ... action-air-pollution](http://www.mja.com.au/careers/199/9/t...action-air-pollution)

Provided by Queensland University of Technology

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