

REFERENCE FRAMEWORK

The Casa de l'Aire-Mas Surell is a proposal for promoting health, and above all children's health, by creating and nurturing healthy, favourable atmospheres based on the close relationship between health and environment.

In recent years, the international and governmental bodies have begun to become aware of this relationship, and have started up several initiatives and investigations on the environmental risk factors and their consequences on health, placing special attention on children's health as the most vulnerable.

In 1978, the World Health Organisation (WHO) and UNICEF promoted an International Conference on Health Primary Attention, in which the Declaration Alma-Ata was approved, which adopted the agreement of health for everyone. The importance of this agreement lay in the fact that the word health was no longer associated with a situation of absence of problems or illnesses, and now defined a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being. Therefore, health was considered a fundamental human right and the achievement of the best possible health became one of the most important social objectives, an objective which, to be carried out, required the intervention of many other social and economic sectors.

As a result of the conclusions of the Declaration of Alma-Ata, the WHO European Regional Office instituted a series of international conferences on the environment and health. Four conferences have been held to date.

The first was in Frankfurt (1989), where the European Charter on Environment and Health was approved, which established the essential principles of the relationship between the environmental factors (physical, chemical, biological and psycho social) that determine human health. The meeting agreed on the creation of the European Centre for Environment and Health as the body responsible for leading policies of environmental health in Europe.

At the second Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health, held in Helsinki in 1994, after evaluating the state of health and environment in Europe, the European Environment and Health Action Plan was adopted. Following the approval of this plan, the member countries agreed to draw up their national environment and health plans and the European Environment and Health Committee was set up, which was responsible for the fulfilment of the plan and for organising the ministerial conferences every five years.

At the Third Ministerial Conference in London in 1999, the European Environment and Health Committee was extended with the inclusion of NGOs and other large groups.

In 2002, alongside the Conferences organised by the European Environment and Health Committee, in the Bangkok declaration the WHO estimated that throughout the world,

the responsibility for more than a quarter of the world morbidity lay in environmental risk factors. More specifically, it was shown that more than 40% of the morbidity affected children of under five, even though this group accounted for 10% of the world population. For this reason, the Bangkok declaration included the commitment to promote the protection of hygiene and health in infants' surroundings.

From the conclusions of the Bangkok declaration, the Fourth Ministerial Conference (Budapest, 2004) had the general subject: "A sustainable future for our children", and resulted in the Children's Environment and Health Action Plan for Europe (CEHAPE). The objectives of this plan were to reduce the respiratory illnesses due to the contamination of interior and exterior air, and especially the frequency of asthma attacks. In addition, to illustrate the impact of the environment on children's health, the World Health Organisation (WHO) presented the first children's health and environment atlas at the Fourth European Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health in Budapest (Hungary). The work brings together a series of data on the effects of environmental risks on the health of our children which, if taken together, offer a graphic image of the dangers we all face and the reasons why more than three million children die around the world each year.

In June 2007, an intergovernmental conference was held in order to revise the implementation of the commitments acquired at the Budapest Conference.

The 5th Environment and Health Conference will be held in Italy in 2009.

The international concern for the relationship between health and environmental factors also has its particular reflection in Europe.

Since it was started, environmental policy in the European Union has been guided by fundamentally sanitary considerations. Numerous problems of environment and health have been able to be resolved, but there is still a lot to do, above all in relation to the health implications of chronic exposure, such as those shown by the European Environment Agency, the WHO and certain national organisations. Here it is indicated that interaction between environment and health is tighter and more complex than was thought up to now.

In its articles 152 and 174, the Treaty of Amsterdam establishes provisions aimed at setting up a community action in the field of environment and health; the E.U. has already started to reply to these demands. During the Sixth Environment Action Programme of the European Community, the E.U. posed the objective of "contributing to high level quality of life and social well-being for citizens, providing an environment where the pollution levels have no harmful effects on human health and the environment". The Action Programme of the European Community in the Area of Public Health (2003-2008) considers the environment a determining factor of health, and the research framework programmes of the E.U. have started specific actions in this area.

In the last decade, the European Union has created different legislation concerning agents that are hazardous to health, such as chemical products, pesticides, air and water contamination, noise, waste and ionising radiation.

Likewise, the true interaction between environment and health has been caused with the preparation of the text called European Environment and Health Strategy of 11th June 2003. This is intended to create a framework to help the cause-effect relationship between environment and health to be better understood, and to provide the necessary information for developing an integrated community policy.

The European Commission therefore started up the project named SCALE (Science, Children, Awareness, Legal Instrument, Evaluation). The first application cycle of this strategy covers the period from 2004 to 2010, and focuses understanding the relationship between the environmental factors and four types of illnesses, which include children's respiratory diseases, asthma and allergies. The proposed strategy is intended to reach a broader awareness of the incidence of environmental factors in the E.U. on human health, in order to determine the "illness load" for which they are responsible and what the reply might be to the challenges presented.

In the more specific case of Spain, there are also initiatives concerned with the relationship between the environmental risk factors and children's health.

The Children's Environment and Health Action Plan for Europe establishes the need to create Environmental Paediatric Units (EPU) and recognises the experience of Spanish paediatricians in the Paediatric Environmental Health Speciality Unit (PEHSU) of the La Fe University Children's Hospital in Valencia, as a useful example to be implemented in our continent. The Hospital Universitari Virgen de la Arriaca in Murcia also stands out as the first centre in Spain with this paediatric sub-speciality covering diagnosis and treatment, and the detection and prevention of children and youth diseases caused by exposure to different polluting agents. The same specialists comment that the lack of training in paediatric environmental health is one of the factors that condition the development of useful prevention strategies and practices when dealing with health complications in children and babies due to shortcomings in diet, the quality of the air or toxic contamination. To continue the work of the paediatricians in this area, the Spanish Paediatrics Association has created a specific Paediatric Environmental Health Committee.

There are other actions alongside the initiative promoted by the Spanish Paediatrics Association. In this case, we might mention the work carried out by the INMA network, which studies the effects of the environment and diet on children's development. The ECODES foundation has also created a seminar on the environment and health and an electronic bulletin that reports on the activities that have been carried out through the seminar.

The importance given to the effects of environmental factors on health has aroused a large number of studies and research works in this area. Particular mention must be made of the recent study performed by the Escola Valenciana d'Estudis per a la Salut (Valencia School of Health Studies), as a co-ordinator centre of the EMECAS Project: 'Estudi Multicèntric dels Efectes a Curt Termini de la Contaminació Atmosfèrica en la Salut' (Multi-Centre Study of the Short Term Effects of Atmospheric Contamination on Health), which has received the +MAS Environment and Health Award given by the Fundació per a la Gestió i Protecció del Medi Ambient (Foundation for the Management and Protection of the Environment)

(FUNGESMA). The Estudi Multicèntric dels Efectes a Curt Termini de la Contaminació Atmosfèrica en la Salut (Multi-Centre Study of the Short Term Effects of Atmospheric Contamination on Health) (EMECAS) is the project that embraces the largest amount of cities for studying atmospheric pollution in Spain.

Its results show that the current levels of atmospheric pollution in our country are a risk to the health of the urban population. The conclusions of the work facilitate the development of air quality control plans, the implementation of preventive strategies in clinical practice and the design of health and environment information systems in Spain.

In the same sense, and focusing on the child population, are the data provided by a study carried out by the Spanish Electromedicine and Clinical Engineering Society, which reveals that more than 40% of illnesses attributable to environmental risk factors are suffered by the under fives and that between 85 and 96 percent of paediatric cancers are related to these factors.