



Chartered
Institute of
Environmental
Health



Environmental Health – the key to improvements in public health

A proposal for the setting up of an Associate Parliamentary Group
for Environmental Health

Foreword

There can surely be few subjects more important in politics than the living and working conditions that constituents have to endure in their everyday life.

Everybody should be entitled to enjoy a healthy and satisfying life in a pleasant, peaceful and pest-free environment. Unfortunately this is not always true. Indeed for some people, life could not be more different.

Environmental health is concerned with the health and wellbeing of not only individuals but also the communities in which they live and the organisations for which they work.

Many environmental health problems are ones that we have caused ourselves and if present and future generations are to enjoy a healthy and satisfying life, we need to identify the broad range of environmental health problems which face us and address them before they become unmanageable.

Dr Stephen Battersby
President
Chartered Institute of Environmental Health

Joan Walley MP
Vice President
Chartered Institute of Environmental Health



Introduction

The Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (CIEH) is a registered charity that is the professional and educational body dedicated to promoting environmental health and to encouraging the highest possible standards in the work and training of environmental health practitioners.

As the world around us changes, so does the CIEH. We're becoming more prominent campaigners on environmental and public health issues, as well as improving services to our members and other stakeholders.

The way the world thinks about health and wellbeing is changing too. Governments now recognise that reducing health inequalities needs more prevention than cure. It's something we have been arguing for over many years. With this recognition comes the opportunity for an enhanced role for environmental health and its practitioners.

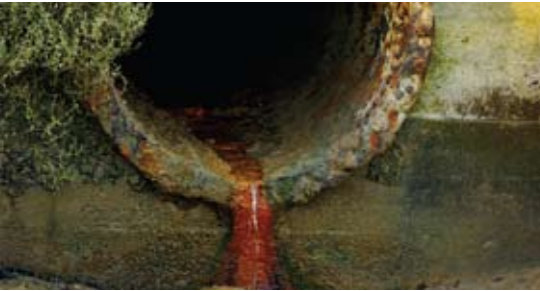
Our vision is to be the knowledge manager and champion of the environmental health community. Our research and evidence base place us at the heart of a network of organisations and individuals dedicated to a common aim.

For something so essential in all of our lives, it is regrettable that there is no specific select committee or parliamentary group or department of government that covers this important subject. There are select committees for health and for environment but both of these subjects, though related, are distinct from environmental health.

For this reason, the CIEH is proposing the establishment of an Associate Parliamentary Group to help promote better environmental health in all its aspects. In this, we are asking for your support.



What is environmental health?



The World Health Organization defines health as: "... a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing, not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."

Environmental health is concerned with all aspects of our living environment and environmental health practice works by assessing, correcting and preventing the impact of environmental stressors on health. These might be biological, chemical, physical, social, psycho-social or any combination of these. Only by having a good understanding of the living environment and how the stressors act upon it, can intervention strategies be determined.

Environmental health practitioners (EHPs) work alongside other public health professionals, such as doctors and community nurses. They are key partners in local and national efforts to protect and improve health and the quality of life, reducing health inequalities of the individuals and communities they serve - very much a preventative approach to the causes of disease and ill health.



The environmental health contribution to public health includes:

- Improvement of housing conditions and urban regeneration
- Quality and availability of safe and nutritious food supplies and support for local food production
- Prevention of accidents and injuries in the home and at work
- Occupational health and safety
- Health protection and communicable disease control
- Control of public health and nuisance pest infestations
- Noise Control
- Control of pollution, including nuisances
- Remediation of contaminated land
- Improvement of air quality

We cannot hide from the fact that poor health often results from poor environments.

Environmental health comprises those aspects of human health, including quality of life, that are determined by physical, chemical, biological, social and psychosocial factors in the environment. It also refers to the theory and practice of assessing, correcting and preventing those factors in the environment that can potentially affect adversely the health of present and future generations - MacArthur and Bonnefoy 1998



Who is involved in environmental health?



Environmental health practitioners work in local authorities, government departments and agencies, the NHS, the armed services, academia, not-for-profit organisations, commercial companies and as private consultants.

They can work in anything from large, medium and small businesses and can be involved in a wide range of jobs including those that involve food safety, housing, health and safety and environmental protection.



It is a subject which often knows no social or geographical divides; some of the problems affect both rich and poor in all areas of the country. However, some of the problems are faced only by the most disadvantaged in society living in urban areas.



Our members work at the coal face on issues such as: housing conditions, noise, air quality, contaminated land, infectious diseases, food safety and occupational health and safety. They come from an increasingly wide range of cultures and backgrounds and interest in the profession is growing fast.

The CIEH is a registered charity with a Royal Charter. We are the professional body for environmental health with over 10,500 members. We set standards and accredit courses and qualifications for the education of practitioners.

We are a regulated awarding body and a major provider of accredited vocational qualifications. We produce leading sector publications and run a comprehensive programme of educational events. We provide information, evidence and policy advice to government, industry and other stakeholders.

We work to promote improvements in environmental and public health policy by campaigning on key issues of concern, raising the status and understanding of environmental health – with national, regional and local government, employers, the media, the public and other stakeholders to ensure that the high professional standards, knowledge and competencies of environmental health practitioners are achieved and maintained.

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What are the key issues?



We are a campaigning organisation, which seeks to improve public health. We have striven for 20 years to get a ban on smoking in public places. We are currently campaigning to: - improve hygiene in hospital kitchens, reconcile water conservation against the backdrop of climate change with making water more affordable for the less well off, and for the licensing of sunbed and tattoo parlours to protect the vulnerable and the young.



We welcome the recent publication of Defra's water strategy and particularly the decision to independently review water charging. However we'd like to see explicit support for vulnerable consumers through the benefits system, help with appliance replacement (modern dual-flush toilets in older properties for example) and proper consideration given in the planning process, so that population growth doesn't overwhelm available resource.



We cannot hide from the fact that poor health often results from poor environments and by improving the conditions in which we live and work, we can move forward with our aim of "creating empty hospital beds by better environmental health".

For example, recent research has shown that assessing and alleviating risks in the home could be more important in preventing broken limbs in elderly people than drugs for osteoporosis.

During the winter of 2006/7, there were over 25,000 excess winter deaths and with climate change, there could be a significant increase in the number of summer deaths as a result of heatwaves in the future. We need to recognise this in our long term social planning. Urban sprawl is causing extra pollution and encouraging obesity in adults and children alike.

Looking at the global picture, we continue to be concerned about the effects of climate change; the movement of goods, animals and people leading to the spread of emerging diseases and increased carbon emissions; and the possibility of a global illness, such as a flu pandemic, which is surely only a matter of time.

Climate change will also bring about a change in the pattern and ecology of pests. Most emerging diseases are zoonotic which will increase the need for proper and competent monitoring and management of appropriate programmes.

The CIEH is based in the UK but as one of the founding bodies of environmental health, we are keen to see standards rolled out internationally and we work to help support EHPs governments and business in developing countries.

This support is primarily given through the International Federation of Environmental Health and our vocational training programmes, such as those recently established in China, India and the USA.



When you arrive at a music festival, you take for granted that the food you buy and the water you drink will be safe, that crowds will be managed effectively and that the music volume won't damage your hearing. This is because environmental health was there before you. And will probably be there after you leave.

What is the legislative position?



Basic problems with food safety, drainage, refuse disposal, pest control, air quality and water supplies throughout the 19th and 20th centuries led to the necessity for government intervention to resolve them.

This year promises to be a very important one for the environmental health community and started well when the Prime Minister announced a greater focus on prevention when it comes to health.



This has always been at the heart of our professional approach because it makes sound public health and economic sense for resources to be focussed more on preventing a problem from arising rather than having to cure it afterwards.

One role of professional bodies such as the CIEH is to provide fact based evidence which ensures that only better and more effective regulations are proposed and that these are capable of achieving the intended aims of protecting public health.



During the year, for example, there will be important legislation before Parliament which, if passed, will have a considerable impact on effective environmental health delivery.

The Regulatory Enforcement and Sanctions Bill would establish the Local Better Regulation Office, with the aim of bringing consistency to local authority enforcement.

The Health and Social Care Bill aims to enhance professional regulation and strengthen the response to infectious disease and contamination by, among other measures, creating an integrated regulator, the Care Quality Commission.

The Housing and Regeneration Bill would establish the Homes and Communities Agency and regulate social housing. It would also make provision about sustainability certificates, landlord and tenant matters, building regulations and mobile homes.

However the Housing Regeneration Bill doesn't address the private sector adequately or include anything on retaliatory evictions. To give an idea of the issue, headline figures in a recent EHCERS report show that there are 6.7m non-decent homes in the private sector as a whole compared with the 1.3m in the social sector. Of those nearly 800,000 privately rented homes have Category 1 hazards under the HHSRS.

In these and all other instances, it will be essential that Members of Parliament, Peers and their advisers have access not only to good, sound, professional advice about environmental health challenges but also to practical and specific information which makes such a difference in the passing of better regulation.

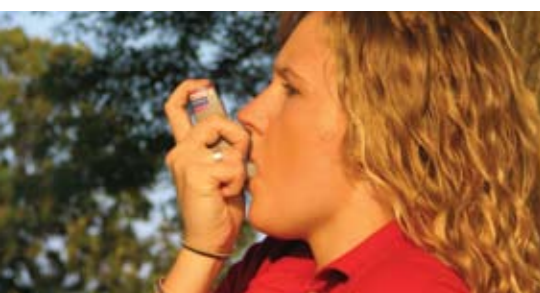


Environmental health professionals have played an important role in the improvements in food safety. They have done this by encouraging workplaces to promote healthy eating; ensuring that food eaten in homes and restaurants is safe to eat; and ensuring that everyone has access to affordable healthy food.

What are we planning?



We work to promote improvements in environmental and public health policy by campaigning on key issues of concern, raising the status and understanding of environmental health – with national, regional and local government, employers, the media, the public and other stakeholders. This will ensure that the high professional standards, knowledge and competencies of environmental health practitioners are achieved and maintained.



We traditionally work very closely across central government, especially with the Department of Health, Defra, DCMS, DBERR, CLG, OFT, FSA, HSE, Home Office and the Cabinet Office. Although we have been very effective in lobbying government, especially in persuading the Department of Health to go for a complete smoking ban in public places during the passage of the Health Bill, we are still trying to get a single government department to act as a sponsor for environmental health issues.



For something as essential to all of our lives as environmental health, it is a serious gap that there is no specific select committee or parliamentary group that covers it, although there are select committees for health and for environment.

After discussions with Joan Walley MP, and working with her, we are seeking to sponsor an all party Associate Parliamentary Group on Environmental Health. The purpose of this will be to raise awareness and understanding of the contribution of environmental health and environmental interventions in improving public health.

The CIEH will be providing the secretarial support for this Group.

We would also provide support for political researchers. This would include regular briefings and complimentary attendance at our seminars and conferences which would give them a chance to gain first hand a better understanding of the problems facing both our profession and the general public.



A major challenge facing us is climate change and the consequent risk to public health from emerging diseases. Many of these diseases are pest borne and environmental health professionals play a significant role in their control.

What happens next?



First, we need to identify those Parliamentarians who are interested in better environmental health.

Then, when we have satisfied the necessary criteria for an Associate Parliamentary Group, we can make the necessary application.

To this end, we are inviting all MPs and Peers to contact us. If you are prepared to support us, please complete the enclosed form and return it to:

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Visit our website www.cieh.org for further detailed information about the activities of the CIEH





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