

Air pollution arguments in favour of wind turbines are full of holes

Editor:

Dr. Robert Oliphant of the Asthma Society of Canada made a number of assertions in this paper last Saturday regarding Ontario air pollution, energy and health that are not only unfounded, but have led to harmful policy choices.

Air pollution in Ontario is much lower today than it was in the 1970s. Yet Dr. Oliphant claims that 6,000 people have been admitted to hospital since last July due to air pollution. He fails to mention that these are not actual patient counts, they are conjectures from a statistical model created a decade ago that was never tested against reality.

One of the defects in Dr. Oliphant's model is that it does not control for variations in income and smoking. In 2010 I published a study, coauthored with two UK statisticians, that examined all hospital admission records in major Canadian cities for all lung-related illnesses (including asthma) from 1974 to 1994. Air pollution was much higher then, so the effects on lung health should have been even stronger. Ours was the first Canadian study to control for socioeconomic factors and weather, while covering all major cities, and all major pollutants, over an interval with high pollution levels. After controlling for variations in income and smoking we found no correlation between air pollution and lung disease.

Likewise, in 2001, the UK Committee on the Medical



File photo

Wind turbines in Bruce County.

Effects of Air Pollution surveyed the data and concluded that healthy individuals would not experience lung problems from contemporary air pollution levels, nor was air pollution likely a cause of asthma.

Another error in Dr. Oliphant's argument is to claim that renewable energy projects reduce air pollution. Environment Canada data show that the coal-fired power plants at Lambton and Nanticoke emit under 900 tonnes of fine particulates annually. This compares to 23,300 tonnes annually from wood-burning fireplaces and over 90,000 tonnes annually from driving on unpaved roads. Simulations done for the Province in

2005 showed that shutting down the power plants would reduce fine particulate levels in most places around the province by less than one-tenth of one percent. It is ludicrous to claim that our power plants are killing hundreds of people across Ontario and sending thousands more to the hospital.

Moreover, renewable energy does not reduce air pollution. Because wind levels fluctuate constantly, the more wind turbines are added to Ontario's grid, the more natural gas-fired backup plants have to be installed and kept running on a constantly-varying basis, which increases both emissions and operating costs. If wind energy were free, as Dr. Oliphant seems to think, why do wind turbine operators need to charge three times the market rate for their electricity?

Widespread myths about Ontario's energy sector have led to disastrous policy choices, like the Green Energy Act. Regarding health effects, I am more concerned about the way soaring energy costs and stagnating employment are taking a toll on household budgets, leading to, among other things, compromised family nutrition and higher stress levels. The energy policies promoted by Dr. Oliphant have been a "cure" far worse than the supposed disease.

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