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The First Family's Asthma Problems

By
Ben Lieberman¹

Both Bill and Hillary Clinton are taking actions that will affect the nation's six million asthmatic children. Unfortunately, Hillary's new \$68 million dollar program to fight childhood asthma probably won't do much good. Worse yet, husband Bill's multi-billion dollar global warming agenda could actually harm the nation's young asthmatics.

Ideologically attractive culprits. The First Lady recently announced a national initiative to address the growing problem of childhood asthma, which has become twice as prevalent over the last 20 years. The new program, to be headed by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), will focus on all aspects of asthma, from educating children and their parents how to deal with the disease, to researching the causes of its disturbingly sharp increase. Unfortunately, many education and research dollars will be squandered focusing on ideologically attractive culprits, particularly industrial pollution, though the link between it and asthma has been studied extensively and found to be weak. Indeed, environmental activists and EPA bureaucrats, who often use asthmatic kids as a justification for clamping down on industrial emissions, have yet to explain why the increase in asthma incidence and mortality has occurred during a time in which outdoor pollution has declined substantially.

A more plausible explanation exists for the alarming rise in childhood asthma – declining indoor air quality. In response to the energy crisis of the 1970s, the federal government embarked on an effort, through regulations, tax incentives, and other inducements, to cut down on energy use in buildings and residences. These efforts sought to reduce “excessive” ventilation considered wasteful of energy.

Weather-tight houses to blame? Consequently, millions of well-insulated, weather-tight houses and buildings have been built over the past two decades. These structures do save energy by holding in more of the already heated or cooled air and reducing the influx of outside air, but there has been an unanticipated side effect – they also concentrate the levels of contaminants inside. The result has been an increase in indoor air-related health problems as people inhale higher levels of airborne pollutants.

¹ Ben Lieberman (benl@cei.org) is a policy analyst at CEI.

Even EPA concludes that “the air within homes and other buildings can be more seriously polluted than the outdoor air in even the largest and most industrialized cities,” and that “for many people, the risks to health may be greater due to exposure to air pollution indoors than outdoors.”² As far back as 1988, the agency recognized that “the current trend toward sealing off homes to conserve energy may have serious health consequences.”³

While the reason or reasons for the asthma increase are still not known, many researchers believe that the deterioration of indoor air quality is a contributor. A *New England Journal of Medicine* editorial suggested “decreased ventilation after the energy crisis in the United States in the 1970s as a cause of increased exposure to the indoor contaminants known to trigger and exacerbate asthma attacks.”⁴

Today, the putative global warming crisis has replaced the energy crisis as the rationale for the same old energy efficiency measures that threaten indoor air quality. If we use less energy, the government’s argument goes, then less greenhouse gas emissions, especially carbon dioxide, will be emitted into the atmosphere. President Clinton’s FY 2000 Climate Change Budget contains many ideas straight out of the Jimmy Carter years, such as tax incentives to build more weather-tight homes and buildings, and subsidies to insulate low income housing. The latter is particularly problematic, given that the rise in asthma mortality has been highest among low income, minority youth.

Schools targeted. Schools have also been targeted by Washington’s energy efficiency efforts. Several public health researchers believe that the asthma trends are partly attributable to the poor indoor air children breath at school as well as at home. One environmental engineer with EPA states that there has been “a general decline in school ventilation in the decades of asthma increase.” Ironically, Mrs. Clinton’s new asthma awareness posters and pamphlets will appear in thousands of the very schools whose indoor air quality has been made worse because of Washington’s energy efficiency crusade, and may continue to be thanks to husband Bill’s global warming plan.

Efficiency at-all-costs approach. It should be noted that energy efficiency and good indoor air quality are not mutually exclusive. The nation’s builders, as well as the manufacturers of heating, ventilation, and air-conditioning (HVAC) equipment, have made significant strides in improving indoor environments while minimizing the energy penalty for doing so. But while there are sensible ways to maintain good indoor air quality in a cost effective manner, the President’s heavy handed, efficiency-at-all-costs approach to global warming doesn’t encourage them.

There are several reasons to oppose the Clinton Administration’s global warming policy. It is very expensive, and addresses a problem that has not even been shown to exist. In addition, Bill’s approach to fighting global warming may very well exacerbate the childhood asthma problems that Hillary and others want to solve.

² United States Environmental Protection Agency and the United States Consumer Product Safety Commission, “The Inside Story: A Guide to Indoor Air Quality.” (1995).

³ United States Environmental Protection Agency and the United States Consumer Product Safety Commission, “The Inside Story: A Guide to Indoor Air Quality.” (1988).

⁴ Thomas A.E. Platts-Mills et al., “Asthma And Indoor Exposure To Allergens,” *The New England Journal of Medicine*, May 8, 1997, p. 1384.