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## ASTHMA, ROACHES, AND REGULATIONS

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A study in the *New England Journal of Medicine* concludes that cockroach dust induces asthma attacks, and "may help explain the frequency of asthma-related health problems in inner-city children." The increase in asthma incidence and mortality is but one example of severe health effects linked to indoor air pollutants. Unfortunately, the federal government has exacerbated this problem, while wasting billions on false solu-

It is no coincidence that indoor air-related health problems began to increase after the “energy crisis” of the 1970s. In an overblown response to fears of energy shortages, the federal government enacted a number of conservation measures, both in the form of regulations and incentive-based programs. Many were aimed at reducing energy use in buildings and residences and focused on reducing “excessive” ventilation, considered wasteful of energy.

Granted, the new weather-tight buildings and homes, including federally subsidized low-income housing, did save energy by holding in more of the already-heated or cooled air and reducing the influx of outside air. However, there was an unanticipated side effect—these energy efficient structures concentrated the levels of contaminants inside. The old cliché, “the solution to pollution is dilution,” had been ignored by the energy conservation-obsessed Washington experts.

The result has been a 20-year-long rise in health problems as people inhale higher levels of airborne pollutants indoors, including biological contaminants from molds, mildew, microorganisms, dust mites, and cockroaches. Best known is “sick-building syndrome” affecting workers in newer, airtight office buildings. The rise in asthma rates may be another. Although the *NEJM* study provides no direct evidence as to why asthma incidence and mortality have been increasing, an accompanying editorial suggests “decreased ventilation after the energy crisis in the United States in the 1970s” as one contributor.

Rather than working on real solutions to the real indoor air problems it helped create, the federal government is spending billions of dollars on one phony air scare after another. To the extent that federal agencies have dealt with indoor air, they have focused on spurious dangers from asbestos, radon, and the like. “Targeting of resources at the most serious concerns has been all but nonexistent,” said CEI adjunct scholar Cassandra Moore, author of *Haunted Housing*, a compendium of exaggerated housing-related scares.

Worst of all, environmental groups are using health hazards more likely related to indoor air pollution as a justification to tighten controls on outdoor air pollutants. Most recently, they have plotted the childhood asthma increase in the campaign to enact controversial new rules lowering ambient ozone and particulate matter standards.

Yet, according to EPA measurements, ozone and particulate matter levels have sharply *declined* during the period of the asthma increase. In addition, the agency found that “the major source of air pollution in our

nation is not the traditional outdoor sources, such as power plants, but the inside of our homes and offices,” and that “the current trend toward sealing off homes to conserve energy may have serious health consequences.”

The *NEJM* study provides further support for the fact that childhood asthma rise is far more plausibly linked to indoor air contaminants than outdoor ones.

This has not stopped environmental activists from making pleas to save the asthmatic children from the ozone and particulate matter “threat,” or from trotting out young asthmatics for use as props in press conferences supporting the rules. Such emotional arguments are necessary because these new rules can’t withstand objective scrutiny.

Several sources within the Clinton Administration have admitted that they will impose high costs and yield minimal benefits. The President’s Council of Economic Advisors conceded that new rules “understate the true costs of stricter standards by orders of magnitude,” and that “the incremental health-risk reduction for more stringent standards is small.” The Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Transportation, and Treasury have raised similar concerns.

The use of asthmatic kids is an understandable diversion. In truth, the new rules’ biggest impact on asthmatic children will be to squander money that could have been spent to really help them by reducing indoor air pollution, providing better medical treatment, or even improving pest extermination.

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