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## Milan 'is pollution capital of Europe'

By Michael Day in Milan  
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It might be renowned as the European capital of design, fashion and football, but Milan has a rather less glamorous aspect: its reputation as the Continent's most polluted city.

New evidence suggests levels of toxic fumes from its traffic-clogged streets are having an alarming effect on infant mortality rates, and sending thousands of children to the city's accident and emergency departments.

The warning from doctors at Milan's Macedonio Melloni hospital comes despite the city's much trumpeted new "ecopass" congestion charge, which was designed to slash air pollution.

Since its introduction in January, levels of pm10s - tiny particles less than 10 micrometres (um) in diameter produced by vehicle exhausts - have already breached the official EU safety level levels on 36 days out of 60.

On 15 February, in one of the worst days on record, levels peaked at 185 micrograms per cubic metre of air - almost four times over the official limit.

advertisement Even the city's chain-smoking fashionistas are donning anti-smog masks.

Masks however, won't stop the smaller, most dangerous pm10s, those with a diameter of less than 2.5 um, from passing deep into the lungs, from where they can cause breathing problems, heart disease and cancer.

In 2004 a report by the World Health Organisation estimated that in Italy's most polluted urban centres, 9 per cent of non accident-related deaths among the over-30s were due to pm10s.

The latest research suggests that children are also being hit hardest by the airborne pollutants. Dr Alessandro Fiocchi, director of paediatrics at the city's Macedonio Melloni hospital, compared the number of children admitted with breathing problems - some life-threatening - on a given day with pm10 levels in the air.

In one period of 10 days in which pm10 levels averaged 67ug/m3, he saw 176 such admissions. In another 10-day period, in which pm10 levels averaged 110 ug/m3, more than twice the safety limit, admissions soared to 401.

Dr Fiocchi said the figures "confirmed the urgent need to limit the damage that is affecting one child in four in the region".

The findings also back suggestions in the European Journal of Epidemiology that high pm10 levels can significantly increase infant mortality.

Emily Backus of Milan's Parents Against Smog group said it was hardly surprising that the Ecopass had had so little effect on pm10 levels.

"The pollution charge introduced January 1 covers just 4 per cent of the city's territory and is not particularly onerous: a 10-year-old diesel truck can tool about the historic centre for €2.5 with the purchase of 50 passes," she said.

Backus suggests the Ecopass is merely a token gesture, designed to strengthen Milan's bid to host Expo 2015.

The city's mayor, Letizia Moratti, has denied this and last week said she would consider banning traffic from the city centre on Sundays.

One lung specialist, Prof Luigi Allegra of Milan University, this week set out an alternative 25-point plan that he says the city should adopt to prevent to thousands of premature deaths.

He is proposing that the pollution charge be raised and the zone be extended outwards, that new metro lines be constructed and that extensive parking sites be provided on the edge of the city so that people living outside Milan can drive their cars there and connect easily with public transport on their way into the city.

And significantly, he calls for the use of diesel cars to be discouraged. They might produce less CO2 than petrol-engined equivalents, but they also create 100 times more pm10s and are



Opponents say the Ecopass is a token gesture that has little benefit

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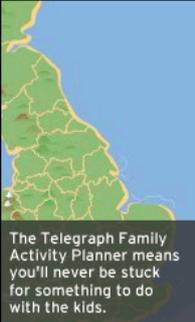
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