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LETTER

Excess lung cancer incidence and radon indoors in a Bulgarian town

EDITOR,—Chronic excess of lung cancer incidence has been observed in a town of Rakovski (about 17 000 inhabitants), Bulgaria. The standardised incidence ratio (SIR) is significantly increased for both sexes.

The situation for the previous two decades is similar (data before 1968 are practically unavailable). The increase could not be satisfactorily explained by site specific occupation (no underground miners, asbestos, chemical or metallurgical industry). To search for a possible environmental agent responsible for the increase, this proportion in the USA large scale surveys was estimated to be 6%.

Ours measurements were made in the season when heating was used and the average over the whole year concentrations may be expected to be somewhat lower (about 30% lower, according to our experience). Detailed study of radon sources, distribution of exposures among the population is forthcoming, but the existence of radon peculiarity in this town is clear.

At present radon risk estimates for the general population are based on epidemiological studies of miners. Attempts to derive direct risk estimates in respect to indoor radon have given conflicting evidence. Therefore, it is difficult to attribute the increased lung cancer incidence in Rakovski entirely to radon exposure. However, Pershagen et al reported relative risk estimates (1.3 for radon concentrations 140–400 Bq/m² and 1.8 for > 400 Bq/m²), which suggest that radon is a probable reason for the higher lung cancer incidence observed. Therefore, we have started a local epidemiological (case-control) study in Rakovski in which smoking history and other possible confounding factors will be investigated. Possible international collaboration in this direction could be of substantial importance.

We are grateful to Dr G Uzunov from the municipality of Rakovski for help in undertaking the measurements.

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NOTICES

Society for Social Medicine
The Society for Social Medicine is holding its Annual Scientific Meeting on 8–10 September 1999 in Sheffield. Further details from Michelle Hassall, Medical Care Research Unit, SCHARR, Regent Court, 30 Regent's Street, Sheffield S1 4DA. Tel: + 44 (0)114 222 0755. Fax: + 44 (0)114 222 0749. Email: m.hassall@sheffield.ac.uk

Club Health 2000
The First International Conference on Night-Life, Substance Use and Related Health Issues is being held on 10–12 November 1999 in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Further details from the Conference Secretariat, HIT Conferences, 1st Floor, Cavern Club, 8 Mathew Street, Liverpool L6 2ER. Tel: +44 (0)151 227 2837. Fax: +44 (0)151 236 4829. Email: CLUB@HIT.ORG.UK