Air pollution and general practice consultations for respiratory illnesses

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Associations between air pollution and hospital admissions and mortalities have been demonstrated in many studies.\(^1\) By contrast, few studies have reported the relation between air pollution and respiratory morbidity in general practice (GP). In these studies, associations have been reported between air pollution and GP consultations for asthma, lower respiratory tract infections, and allergic rhinitis.\(^2\) To further explore these associations, we prospectively collected daily numbers of GP consultations from seven clinics in various districts of Hong Kong and performed a time series analysis to examine their relations with daily concentrations of PM\(_{10}\), NO\(_2\), SO\(_2\), and O\(_3\) measured in stations within or nearest to each district.

**PARTICIPANTS, METHODS, AND RESULTS**

Seven GP clinics located in different districts in Hong Kong were recruited to provide data on daily patient consultations throughout the year 2000 using a standard format that captured information on age, gender, and diagnosis. The diagnosis was coded in accordance with the International Classification of Primary Care 2nd edition. New cases of illnesses were distinguished from follow up visits. Only new cases of respiratory illnesses were used for statistical analysis. All patients’ data were checked and validated.

The generalised additive model\(^4\) using Poisson distribution with log-link function was adopted to construct a core model that regressed the daily numbers of GP visits in each clinic on the time variable (day), daily mean temperature and humidity, a holiday indicator, and the day of the week. Smoothers were used to control for long term seasonal patterns of GP visits. The core models were chosen so that the predicted daily numbers of GP consultation best fitted the observed numbers. The quasi-likelihood method was used to correct for over-dispersion. When significant autocorrelation was detected, it was adjusted by adding autoregressive terms (GP consultation data). The high correlation between PM\(_{10}\) and total suspended particulates (predominantly larger particles that might cause irritation and inflammation of the upper respiratory tract) makes the association with URTI biologically plausible. GP consultations for respiratory illnesses in general, and URTI in particular, represent a larger proportion of community morbidity. Hence, the impact of air pollution on public health extends far beyond the increase in hospital admissions and mortalities.

**Contributors**

TWW had the original study idea, planned the study, wrote the paper and is guarantor of the study. YTW recruited and coordinated the GPs and validated the data. TSY and CMW contributed to the planning of the study. CMW and AHSW gave useful comments. WT analysed the data.

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**Table 1** Combined risk estimates for consultations for upper respiratory tract infections (URTI) and all respiratory diseases and mean daily concentrations of pollutants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pollutants*</th>
<th>Mean (SD) daily concentration (µg/m(^3))</th>
<th>URTI RR (95% CI)</th>
<th>All respiratory RR (95% CI)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NO(_2)</td>
<td>59.50 (21.81)</td>
<td>1.0125 (0.9906 to 1.0349)</td>
<td>1.0342 (0.9938 to 1.0763)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PM(_{10})</td>
<td>49.63 (24.84)</td>
<td>1.0301 (1.0154 to 1.0450)</td>
<td>1.0328 (1.0252 to 1.0405)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O(_3)</td>
<td>27.52 (77.18)</td>
<td>1.0174 (0.9933 to 1.0420)</td>
<td>1.0150 (0.9882 to 1.0426)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SO(_2)</td>
<td>16.57 (12.68)</td>
<td>0.9923 (0.9487 to 1.0378)</td>
<td>1.0068 (0.9697 to 1.0454)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*NO\(_2\), nitrogen dioxide; PM\(_{10}\), particulates with an aerodynamic diameter less than 10 µm; O\(_3\), ozone; SO\(_2\), sulphur dioxide.
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