

Radon and lung cancer: A National Scandal

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The recent study by Darby (December 2004), and co-workers in the BMJ, on radon in homes and the risk of lung cancer, confirms what is in fact a national scandal.

The study was an analysis of individual data from 13 case-control studies from European countries. The subjects in this extensive analysis were: 7148 cases of lung cancer and 14 208 controls. The combination of previous studies was carried out to ensure that greater statistical power would be achieved; smaller studies are often not large enough to assess moderate risk.

The results confirm the direction of most modern research on the topic of radon in homes. The main findings are:

- There is strong evidence for association between radon concentration in the home and lung cancer;
- The dose-response relation appears to be linear, with no evidence of a threshold dose;
- There is a significant dose-response relation even below currently recommended action levels;
- The risk of lung cancer is about 16% per 100 Bq m⁻³, throughout a range of exposure levels;
- The absolute risk to smokers and recent ex-smokers is much greater than to lifelong non-smokers;
- Radon accounts for around 9% of lung cancer deaths and 2% of all cancer deaths in Europe.

This confirms the opinion that somewhere in the region between 1 500 and 2 000 lung cancer deaths may occur in the UK annually. This is a national scandal of the first order. Imagine if this number of deaths occurred because of `drink fuelled violence on the weekend`? Our Government Ministers would be seen to act swiftly and purposely. But what is the position in the UK?

An Action Level of 200 Bq m⁻³. This new study shows that this level needs reconsideration now, not in the vague future.

No statutory requirement to radon test all new build in Affected Areas. The cost is very low indeed and does not come out of Government funds. The only way to prove that protection in new build is effective is to test and not just consult a `radon map`.

Radon proof barriers in new build that are not as substantial as they could be. In Ireland, the position is different and a much more substantial barrier is used. Why not here? The Precautionary Principle would suggest that we should. This needs urgent consideration.

Ineffective radon reduction campaigns that are based on very simplistic communication and marketing techniques. The media has a wide range of sophisticated techniques to communicate to the population. Why not use them and design campaigns around elucidated pro-environmental drivers to encourage take up of remediation? The Government has not been too well advised here by a range of organisations concerned with radon in homes.

A Government that is avoiding the issue? Where are the new high impact initiatives?

What is needed is a national debate that will stimulate new and dynamic ways to tackle this problem. Not the same old, tired, simplistic messages given out time and time again by Government and its allies. Remember, these deaths are occurring year on year. Have we moved on much since the early 1990s?

Lets us all work through the Radon Council to get some action and stop these needless deaths. Remediation is simple and low cost. All we need is the political will.