

## **Study of hospitals puts price tag on California's dirty air**

By Bobby Caina Calvin

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California's dirty air led to nearly \$200 million in hospital spending over a three-year period – including \$9 million in Sacramento County – because of asthma, pneumonia and other pollution-triggered ailments, according to a study released today.

With its research, Rand Corp. attempts to put a price tag on the state's bad air. The study analyzed records from hospitals and air quality agencies from 2005 to 2007. As many as 30,000 people statewide sought relief in emergency rooms because of air pollution during that period, the report states.

Sacramento County registered the fifth-highest health costs related to pollution, according to the study, trailing Los Angeles, Orange, San Bernardino and Riverside counties.

Researchers also undertook case studies at five hospitals, including UC Davis Medical Center, to determine how their finances are affected by poor air quality. From 2005 to 2007, \$1.9 million was spent at UC Davis Medical Center by Medicare, Medi-Cal and other insurers to cover the cost of pollution-related care.

"California's failure to meet air pollution standards causes a large amount of expensive hospital care," said John Romley, the study's lead author.

While there is little debate that bad air often leads to bad health, particularly among those predisposed to respiratory problems, Rand researchers say their study for the first time breaks down who paid the bills.

"Very little is known about who pays for the care. It's not trivial," Romley said. "It's not just about what's being spent, but who's paying."

Medicare and Medi-Cal paid two-thirds of the costs associated with poor air quality, according to the study. Commercial insurers and other private sources footed the rest of the bill.

Among private insurers, Kaiser Foundation Health Plans accounted for \$30 million of the \$193 million spent during the three-year study period. The expenses borne by insurers do not include emergency room visits, researchers said.

Not surprisingly, more than two-fifths of the expenses were concentrated in traffic-choked Los Angeles County, with the rest mostly concentrated along the state's inner valleys, from Kern to Sacramento counties, where illness-causing particulates are more likely to linger.

Researchers say hospital costs are just a fraction of the hundreds of millions of dollars spent each year on pollution-related medical care.

The study focused on pollution from ozone, most commonly derived from automobile tailpipe emissions, and fine particulate matter, such as soot from fireplaces and wood-burning stoves.

"This study shows yet another side of the air pollution story by citing the health costs, both physical and financial, that Californians must pay because of smog and soot," state Air Resources Board

Chairwoman Mary D. Nichols said in an e-mail sent by her office. "In particular, data like this shows why cleaning up the state's legacy fleet of diesel engines makes economic as well as environmental sense."

An agency spokesman said the Air Resources Board is moving ahead with new regulations to reduce diesel emissions by 85 percent by 2020.

[L.A. Daily News editorial, Monday, March 1, 2010:](#)

## **Clear the air: Smog check fraud costs everyone** **Smog check fraud costs everyone**

In a state that has done such a remarkable job in recent decades cleaning its air of choking smog, it's disheartening to hear of widespread fraud in the smog check process.

Last week, a report on California's smog-test program found that up to a third of older cars that have passed mandated pollution checks actually fail them when re-tested at random on the streets.

The air is bad enough in Los Angeles and the Valley that the last thing it needs is a bunch of antiquated smoke-belchers tooling up and down the streets. But even more troubling is what the findings say about the Californians complicit in this scam - smog-check station operators giving false test scores and owners of clunkers or hot-rods, probably lubricating the way toward a passed test with a few extra bucks.

This isn't just a few odd people looking the other way. The state audit found what many officials consider to be a pattern of criminal behavior on the part of smog-check station owners. The results of the investigation by a private firm working for the state, which were known last March, were kept under wraps to allow legislation to be crafted to address the problem.

Legislation by Assemblyman Mike Eng, D-Monterey Park, would change how smog checks are performed. The old tailpipe testing on a treadmill in the station, which is said to be easily subjected to fraud, would be phased out in favor of tests that utilize real-world analysis of the computers in place on almost all vehicles put on the road in the past 14 years. This makes sense.

Remarkably, for a change in a state bureaucracy, the new testing promises to be cheaper for consumers than the current method.

The crackdown on unscrupulous testing stations should help clear the air. In the past nine months, the state says 22 smog-check stations have had their licenses suspended; before the investigation, only one or two stations in this vast state were cited for irregularities each year. The state claims the crackdown could stop an extra 70 tons of pollutants from entering our air each day - and we will be all the healthier for that.

The fraud uncovered is not limited to station operators. It turns out that there may be as many unscrupulous car owners as well who can apparently access Web sites that give drivers advice on how to game the tests with short-lived gimmicks. They might save a few bucks by doing so, but these kind of tricks are costing us all plenty.

Here's to cleaner air and the efforts by authorities that make it possible.