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NEWS

Health professionals call for urgent halt to fracking because of public health concerns

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The BMJ

A health professionals' campaigning group has called for an immediate moratorium on fracking for shale gas in the United Kingdom until a comprehensive assessment of the effects on public health and the environment is completed.

The report from Medact described fracking as an "inherently risky" practice.[1] It highlights numerous potential health hazards associated with hydraulic fracturing for shale gas, or "fracking," including air pollution and water contamination; negative effects on health associated with noise, traffic, spoilage of the natural environment, and local and socioeconomic disruption; and the indirect effects of climate change as a result of greenhouse gas emissions.

Medact cautioned that although it was not possible to calculate the precise risks posed by fracking, these risks may be higher in the UK than in other countries because of the more densely populated areas close to fracking sites.

At a meeting to launch the report on 30 March David McCoy, director of Medact, said that fracking "has already been suspended in Wales and Scotland because of health and climate risks, and New York State has banned fracking because of the 'significant health risks.'"

Medact's report emphasised that shale gas was not itself a clean source of energy and that investing in shale gas would also "undermine our commitment to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and be incompatible with global efforts to prevent global warming."

Patrick Saunders, a coauthor of the report, said, "Climate change is the biggest long term threat to global public health. Suspending fracking now will also allow time for the independent UK Committee on Climate Change to complete its next assessment of the climate change risks."

The conclusions of Medact's report are in contrast to those of a 2014 report by Public Health England, which found the risks from fracking to be "low if operations are properly run and regulated."[2]

However, McCoy said that the current regulatory system was inadequate. He said that the "report highlights the limitations of Public Health England's report on fracking, including the fact that it was narrow in scope and failed to critically assess the adequacy and reliability of the regulatory system."

Joe Corré, head of TalkFracking.org, an online campaign aimed at raising awareness of the issues concerning fracking, described Medact's report as a step in the right direction and "a breath of fresh air." He said, "Finally, we are seeing some unbiased and undistorted academic research."

Meanwhile in a letter to The BMJ 18 leading health professionals, including the former chair of the Royal College of General Practitioners and the former deputy chief medical officer for England, have said that they wanted to draw public attention to the health concerns outlined in the Medact report.[3] They concluded, "The arguments against fracking on public health and ecological grounds are overwhelming. There are clear grounds for adopting the precautionary principle and prohibiting fracking."

1 McCoy D, Saunders P. Health and fracking: the impacts and opportunity costs. Medact 2015. www.medact.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/medact_fracking-report_WEB3.pdf.
2 Kibble A, Cabianca T, Daraktchieva Z, Gooding T, et al. Review of the potential public health impacts of exposures to chemical and radioactive pollutants as a result of shale gas extraction. Centre for Radiation, Chemical and Environmental Hazards, Public Health England. 2014. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/332837/PHE-CRCE-009_3-7-14.pdf.
3 Stott R, Atkinson S, Mongomery H, et al. Public Health England's draft report on shale gas extraction [electronic response to Law et al., *BMJ* 2014;348:g2728]. www.bmj.com/content/348/bmj.g2728/rr.

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