

All nurses should understand the principles of planetary health

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The health of the planet and the implications for family nurses

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Ella Kissi-Debrah died in London, UK in February 2013 aged only 9 years old, having been unwell with respiratory disease requiring multiple hospital admissions for several years. The inquest ruling in 2014, concluded that she died of acute respiratory failure but her mother Rosamund Kissi-Debrah, campaigned for years to have her daughter's death examined by a second coroner. As a result, in December 2020 a landmark ruling by coroner, Philip Barlow, made legal history, describing her cause of death as acute respiratory failure, severe asthma and air pollution exposure; this is the first time a Coroner has found that air pollution was a contributory cause of illness and death.

Explaining that Ella had been exposed to nitrogen dioxide and particulate matter pollution in excess of World Health Organisation guidelines, with traffic emissions as the main source, he concluded that she died of asthma contributed to by:

- exposure to excessive air pollution
- failure to reduce pollution levels to legal limits and
- failure to provide her mother with information about the potential for air pollution to exacerbate asthma

An expert witness Prof Stephen Holgate, said Ella, who had lived with her family in close proximity to highly polluting roads all her life was *"like a canary in a coalmine"*.

So what are the implications for nurses given this landmark ruling in the case of Ella's death? The President of IFNA, Professor Sonja Meiers said: *"Ella's illness, suffering, and death certainly highlights the need for reforms to improve the health of our most vulnerable families. Only when we achieve planetary health can we achieve family health for all. The International Family Nursing Association is committed to advancing family health through planetary health"*.

The IFNA 2020 position statement on "Planetary Health and Family Health" (in full [click here](#)) affirms that *"nurses worldwide should understand how the health of the planet affects families, and family nurses should collaborate to act on this relationship through education, research and practice"*.

At the core, we believe that incorporating a planetary health lens in family nursing education, research, and practice will positively influence family health. The position statement upholds nine essential activities and outcomes for IFNA; here we review three of these in the light of the ruling of Ella's death and ask questions of the reader to stimulate debate. We encourage you to respond.

1. *Teaching future nurses about the relevance of planetary health to family health*

- Could these issues be integrated into pre-registration and post-graduate modules on public health issues (including: impact of pollution, inequalities in health and intersectionality between the two) to inform and educate students around this agenda?
- Ella had over thirty hospital admissions and more than likely multiple primary care interactions. What could nurses have done at these interactions? Does a nursing assessment consider pollution impact?

2. *Contributing to the research agenda for planetary health/human health*

The IFNA sees the following opportunity and responsibility: Family nurses are called upon to examine upstream prevention efforts to mitigate climate sequelae downstream (Leffers & Butterfield, 2018) with the goal of identifying the most promising areas for family nurses to contribute to adaptation and resilience within families. How might this apply to Ella's family?

The Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, said "*Toxic air pollution is a public health crisis, especially for our children, and the inquest underlined yet again the importance of pushing ahead with bold policies such as expanding the Ultra-Low Emission Zone to inner London*". What are family nurses' responsibilities?

To address planetary health, a mix of research is needed using a variety of methods including epidemiology, big data analysis, action research, and phenomenology. Family nurses are in a unique position to gain insight through their connections with individuals and families and learn about their behaviours as family nurses establish partnerships with communities affected by planetary health.

In a related article by The New Scientist which discussed the landmark ruling by the coroner in Ella's case, it is known an article in the New Scientist reported that Ella's case is not isolated with as many as 36000 UK deaths a year linked to air pollution, and predicted that this ruling could "*herald a seismic shift in efforts to clean up air pollution in the UK*".

3. *Implementing generalist and advanced family nursing practice with a planetary health lens*

In advanced family nursing practice, nurses have a responsibility to advocate for equity and justice for families and to promote environments that safeguard the health of families (IFNA Position Statement on Advanced Practice Competencies for Family Nursing, 2017). How might we engage and promote good practice for other families like Ella's who live in highly polluted environments?

To read the IFNA position statement on Planetary Health and Family Health in full [click here](#)

Further and related reading:

<https://www.newscientist.com/article/2263165-landmark-ruling-says-air-pollution-contributed-to-death-of-9-year-old/#ixzz6iyHfzadQ>

Associations of long-term average concentrations of average concentrations of nitrogen dioxide with nitrogen dioxide with mortality: A report by the Committee on the Medical Effects of Air Pollutants

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/734799/COMEAP_NO2_Report.pdf

Whitmee S, Haines A, Beyrer C *et al* Safeguarding human health in the Anthropocene epoch: report of The Rockefeller Foundation–Lancet Commission on planetary health Lancet 2015; 386: 1973–2028 [http://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736\(15\)60901-1.pdf](http://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736(15)60901-1.pdf)

Teenage friends of pollution victim campaign for cleaner air

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/teenage-friends-of-pollution-victim-start-choked-up-campaign-for-cleaner-air-mmklx8trx?shareToken=acbb089266b0b47af99a89b72b1bb368>