New Study Shows Substantial, Regional Cardiovascular Health Benefits of Closing Polluting Coking Operation

News that the closure of the Shenango Coke Works facility led to immediate and lasting improvements in the overall health of the North Boroughs communities surrounding the plant was welcomed by the environmental advocacy organizations that worked to shut the plant down in January 2016.

Led by researchers at NYU Grossman School of Medicine, the study released today showed that the closing of one of Pittsburgh's biggest emitters of fossil fuel-related air pollution led to immediate and lasting declines in emissions and, "in turn, were linked to nearly-instant decreases in local heart-related emergency department visits and hospitalizations for cardiovascular diseases," say the study authors.

The study and press release can be read here.

Published online in the journal Environmental Health Research on July 31, the study showed that "average daily levels of sulfur dioxide, a major toxic chemical component in air pollution and by-product of coke-making, fell by 90% at government air-monitoring stations near the plant and by 50% at another air-monitoring station roughly 10 kilometers (more than six miles) away. Arsenic in particulate matter, another coal-combustion by-product that can be inhaled, fell by 66%.”

Local environmental advocates hailed the news for confirming the lived experience of local residents.

"We appreciate the research that was done that demonstrates what residents have always known. We knew residents were being harmed," said Angelo Taranto, one of the co-founders of Allegheny County Clean Air Now, a community advocacy organization that came together to fight pollution from the plant. "We've known their stories. This research bears out the experiences that people have had and the health problems they have suffered living in the shadow of Shenango."

"There is no question that air pollution is harmful, shortening life expectancies and increasing illness and mortality rates in heavily polluted areas," said Lewis Braham, ACCAN member. "But often in
highly polluted regions of the U.S. like Allegheny County, major industrial polluters claim it is impossible to tell if the pollution they are specifically spewing into the air is the source of illness.

"The Allegheny County Health Department (ACHD) needs to stop being the handmaiden of industry and take a hard look at itself and ask "For whom do we really work?" It isn't the polluters," Braham added.

This video shows a selection of the thousands of pollution events at Shenango Coke Works that were recorded by Allegheny County Clean Air Now and Carnegie Mellon's CREATE lab. These images were critical in documenting many unlawful pollution episodes that required federal intervention to curtail ongoing community health harms.

"This is an example of what happens when we bring together community advocacy, public health expertise and smart technology," said Matt Mehalik, executive director of the Breathe Project. "This is a dramatic, positive health achievement in air quality for a plant that is one-tenth the size of the Clairton Coke Works."

**Video credits:**
Allegheny County Clean Air Now
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