

Medical and health experts say air pollution from coal plants is causing unnecessary and expensive lung and heart problems in Serbia and in Europe.

A Statement on reducing chronic disease by reducing dependency on fossil fuels, signed by public health professionals in Serbia, was launched at a press conference at the Ministry of Health.

Deputy Health Minister of Serbia, prof dr Berislav Vekić says that an effective programme of health prevention in Serbia must include a focus on the promotion of cleaner air. *"Reducing the level of pollutants in the air would produce very significant reductions in deaths, suffering from respiratory and heart problems and health care costs in Serbia,"* he says.

*"Health protection must therefore be considered in energy choices. Long-term effects on population health in Serbia should be taken into account when developing energy policies."*

One of the signatories to the Statement, and working with the Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL) in Serbia, is prof. dr. Marija Jevtić, Medical faculty University of Novi Sad, Institute of Public Health of Vojvodina. She says: *"Doctors are very concerned about air pollution and are calling on the government to take health into account when taking decisions on energy policy."* The Statement follows from a meeting organized by HEAL in Serbia in October 2014.

Dr Jevtic will take the message about air pollution and health to a conference on 5 June in Belgrade on environment in Serbia's future accession to the European Union.

Just last week, the World Health Organization (WHO) agreed a first-ever resolution on air quality, which is a major milestone for improving the health of people suffering from diseases related to poor air quality. The resolution paves the way for health ministries in all countries, including Serbia, to redouble their efforts to reduce the health impacts of air pollution.

HEAL and many health professionals have repeatedly pointed out that opting out of coal and fossil fuels would quickly and dramatically cut the health burden. It would also reduce carbon missions and save future costs in the EU accession process.

To date, countries of the Western Balkans seeking to join the EU have made almost no progress on the process of aligning their environmental and climate policies with the EU's framework. Serbia's subsidies to coal investment are taking the country in the opposite direction and risk making the country a host to unhealthy energy projects.

HEAL is supporting the calls of medical experts for cleaner energy policies in countries throughout Europe. *"Serbia's health professionals are joining colleagues in EU countries calling for cleaner energy for better health (9),"* says Anne Stauffer, HEAL's Deputy Director based in Brussels, Belgium. *"Plans in Serbia to increase investment in coal-fired plants*

*would lead to increasing health costs whereas opting for renewable energy and energy savings would reduce asthma and chronic lung and heart conditions. Serbia's health ministry has an opportunity to achieve important progress in public health by leading a dialogue on the harm caused to health by fossil fuels. Cleaner energy brings health benefits and less coal burning also helps to achieve climate targets. Recognition of this win-win option would put Serbia ahead of other Balkan countries in the EU accession process."*