

5 June 1990

A breath of harmful air for youngsters

The initial findings of a local medical study indicate that students in industrial areas are infected by more respiratory disorders than those living in less polluted areas.

In the light of these findings by the Hongkong University's Department of Community Medicine and Paediatrics, the Government is hoping that industrialists will begin to play their part in the battle against pollution.

The study was carried out last year and altogether 3,895 children from two areas were examined by a team of doctors.

The initial findings showed that children in Kwai Tsing, west Kowloon, suffered from more sore throats and coughs than did children in Southern District on Hongkong Island.

Although the analysis of the study is not yet complete and the initial findings showed that cases of asthma are about the same (about eight per cent of the children examined) in the two groups of students, it does seem clear that air pollution poses a real threat to the health of Hongkong people.

According to Government estimates about 1.5 to two million people in Hongkong are exposed to high levels of sulphur dioxide.

To combat this the Government has introduced measures to clean up the air we breathe. From July

1 factories must stop using high sulphur fuels which are a major cause of Hongkong's air pollution.

However, many environmentalists wonder whether the Government is serious in its assault on those industries that pollute our air.

A legal tussle between the Government and 27 factories in Tsing Yi Industrial Centre highlighted the Government's inconsistency in tackling this matter.

“

According to Government estimates about 1.5 to two million people in Hongkong are exposed to high levels of sulphur dioxide.

In 1988, the Environmental Protection Department (EPD) issued two abatement notices to the factories in Tsing Yi demanding a reduction in the sulphur dioxide emissions from the factories. The department also suggested that they should use light fuel oil in order to reduce the sulphur dioxide billowing into the air.

The factories appealed to the Air Pollution Appeal Board which

later ruled that the notices were legally valid.

But before the appeal hearing could establish whether their emissions constituted a nuisance to neighbouring residents the factories sought a judicial review.

After drawn out legal proceedings, the Court of Appeal dismissed the factories appeal in December last year but, as yet, a date for the resumption of the appeal hearing has not been set.

In August last year, the EPD decided to prosecute the factories for not observing the abatement notices. At the time it said the prosecution had to go ahead as the case was of high importance.

But, also in December, the Court of Appeal ruled that prosecution against the factories for failing to comply with the abatement notices should be suspended until the appeal hearing was completed.

Ironically, the Government is considering whether it should withdraw the prosecution on the grounds that the forthcoming fuel oil control regulations would mean that the factories had to obey the abatement notices anyway.

Should these factories, which completely disregarded the abatement notices, be allowed to remain legally unchallenged?

The Government so far has not offered a clear answer.