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How to breathe easy

Tackling our toxic air is crucial, not just for good health, but as a means to confront the climate crisis, says **Sadiq Khan**

ALL human life is powered by breath. But not all of us breathe the same air.

According to the World Health Organization, air pollution is a public health emergency – 99 per cent of the global population breathe toxic air. The 9 million early deaths from air pollution-related diseases worldwide each year are on a par with the number caused by tobacco smoking.

And yet tainted air's effects aren't evenly spread. The harm caused by it is concentrated among the most disadvantaged people in society. More than 90 per cent of air pollution-related deaths occur in low and middle-income countries. In many higher-income countries, air pollution is a social justice issue too, with the poorest and those from ethnic minority backgrounds least likely to own a car, but worst affected by dirty air.

Before I was elected mayor of London in 2016, I barely thought about air pollution. As I explain in my new book *Breathe*, I spent the early part of my 30s driving around London in a gas-guzzling Land Rover Discovery. I even voted for a third runway at Heathrow Airport as an MP. It was only when I was diagnosed with adult-onset asthma in 2014 – brought on by breathing London's polluted air while training for the city's marathon – that I started to realise the scale of the problem. I was scandalised: I couldn't believe I had been made ill just by inhaling the air of the city I love.

Over the next few years, I would



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find myself reflecting more deeply on the links between climate change and health. After my diagnosis, I began to notice the cars idling outside schools and the exhaust fumes streaming out of vehicles in gridlocked traffic. I learned that in London alone, around 4000 people die prematurely each year because of toxic air. And, in turn, I started to learn something crucial about environmental politics.

The received wisdom among politicians is that climate policy is a vote loser; that people think of climate change as a "tomorrow" issue rather than a "today" issue.

But air pollution proves how wrong that is. After all, the main causes of climate breakdown – greenhouse gases, particularly from transport, industry and power generation – are also the key causes of air pollution.

That means environmental policies needn't focus solely on climate change tomorrow. You can get people to focus on the polluted air they are breathing today. It is buy one get one free: tackle air pollution and tackle the climate emergency at the same time.

This insight is what led me to team up with Rosamund Kissi-Debrah, one of the most

remarkable women I have met. Her daughter Ella tragically died at the age of 9, the victim of a form of asthma exacerbated by her home's proximity to London's South Circular Road. Rosamund and I first collaborated to help get air pollution recognised as a cause of death on Ella's death certificate, a first in the UK.

In the years since, Rosamund has continually emphasised the need to do more, and faster, on air pollution. She has been a key ally in the successful push to expand London's Ultra-Low Emission Zone later this year, which penalises the use of more-polluting vehicles. The initial zone contributed to the toxicity in central London's air falling by almost 50 per cent in two years and a 94 per cent reduction in the number of Londoners living in areas with illegal levels of nitrogen dioxide.

This should give us all hope that we can successfully tackle the climate emergency and dirty air. But we need to do more on air pollution, and faster. My book is a guide to how we do that.

People like Rosamund point the way to a better green politics. She taught me that we aren't just in a climate crisis, but a health one too. If we can convince people of the need for cleaner air, we can also take on the climate emergency. ■



Sadiq Khan is mayor of London and author of *Breathe: Tackling the climate emergency*

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