

Air pollution is a greater threat than tobacco, says doctor

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Former director of AIIMS–Delhi and pulmonologist Randeep Guleria delivering an oration on National Doctor's Day at an event organised by Indian Medical Association at Taj Deccan in Hyderabad on Tuesday. | Photo Credit: SIDDHANT THAKUR

Former director of All India Institute of Medical Sciences-Delhi and renowned pulmonologist Randeep Guleria issued a stark warning about the public health crisis

posed by air pollution, calling it a greater threat than tobacco, during an address in Hyderabad on Tuesday, celebrated as National Doctors' Day.

Speaking at the event organised by the Indian Medical Association, Dr. Guleria urged the medical community to adopt the 'One Health' approach that integrates human, animal and environmental health.

"Air pollution is a silent killer," Dr. Guleria said, citing recent studies that attribute 8.1 million deaths globally in 2021 to air pollution, a toll greater than that of COVID-19. He said the rise of non-communicable diseases such as cancer, diabetes, and cardiovascular disorders has overtaken communicable diseases as the dominant health burden in India, particularly in southern States. "Air pollution is now among the top three causes of death and disability globally, and we are not paying enough attention," he said.

Highlighting how particulate matter smaller than 2.5 micrometres can penetrate deep into the lungs and bloodstream, Dr. Guleria explained its link to a range of diseases, including asthma, strokes, dementia, low birth weight, and even osteoporosis in postmenopausal women. "We now have evidence that air pollution is linked to type 1 and type 2 diabetes, reproductive issues and even spontaneous abortions," he said.

He also drew attention to the disproportionate impact of poor air quality in Indian cities. He referred to a recent study covering ten Indian cities, including Hyderabad, Mumbai, Varanasi and Shimla, that showed a 1.4% rise in daily mortality associated with PM2.5 exposure, even at pollution levels below India's current permissible standards.

"This is not a Delhi problem. It is a Hyderabad problem, a Varanasi problem, a Srinagar problem. The entire nation is breathing poison," he said. He also warned that current Indian air quality standards are far above what the World Health Organization recommends, and called for urgent revision and implementation.

"Pandemics are not rare anymore. In the last 25 years, we have seen two global pandemics and several major outbreaks. This is directly tied to how we are treating the planet," he said.

He concluded with a call for collaborative, multi-sectoral action. “We need doctors, veterinarians, environmental scientists, urban planners, and policy-makers to work together. Without a unified approach, we will keep losing lives, silently and steadily to the air we breathe and the systems we ignore.”

The event was attended by Indian Medical Association (IMA) national president Dilip Bhanushali, IMA Telangana president Dwarkanath Reddy and AIG Hospital chairman D. Nageshwar Reddy among other senior doctors.

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