

In Landmark Ruling, Air Pollution Recorded as a Cause of Death for British Girl

Legal and environmental experts hailed a coroner's ruling that, for the first time in Britain, directly linked a specific person's death to air pollution.



By Elian Peltier

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LONDON — A 9-year-old girl who suffered a fatal asthma attack in 2013 became the first person in Britain to officially have air pollution listed as a cause of death, a British official said.

The landmark ruling puts a face and a name on one of the millions of people whose deaths are hastened by air pollution across the world every year. And in Britain, legal experts said, it could open a new door to lawsuits by pollution victims or their families.

The girl, Ella Adoo-Kissi-Debrah, lived near a major circular road in southeast London and died in February 2013. An asthmatic, she had been taken to the hospital nearly 30 times in less than three years and suffered numerous seizures.

Her mother said during the inquiry in recent weeks that if she had been told air pollution was contributing to her daughter's ill health, she would have moved, The Guardian reported.

In the ruling on Wednesday, assistant coroner Philip Barlow in London said air pollution had significantly helped induce and exacerbate Ella's asthma, adding that she had been exposed to levels of nitrogen dioxide and particulate matter in excess of World Health Organization guidelines.

"The principal source of her exposure was traffic emissions," Mr. Barlow, of the London Inner South Coroner's Court, said in his conclusion.

The effects of air pollution kill an estimated seven million people across the world every year, according to the World Health Organization. Ambient air pollution, which contributed to Ella's death, "accounts for an estimated 4.2 million deaths per year due to stroke, heart disease, lung cancer and chronic respiratory diseases," according to the W.H.O.

Legal and health experts hailed Wednesday's ruling as a landmark for Britain and other countries because it directly linked air pollution to a specific death. The United Nations Environment Program wrote last year that if air pollution were to be declared a cause of Ms. Adoo-Kissi-Debrah's death, it would be "the first time that air pollution has ever been explicitly linked to a named individual's death."

"We usually have estimates of numbers, or what we called 'deaths attributed to,' but there's never been one identified case, because it is very hard to directly link a death to air pollution," said Jonathan Grigg, a professor of pediatric respiratory and environmental medicine at Queen Mary University London. "This is a groundbreaking decision, with pretty overwhelming evidence."

Countless studies have shown that polluted air, whether caused by car traffic, coal-fired plants or oil refineries, harms billions of people across the world. In California, wildfire smoke has been poisoning children, some paying a higher price than others; in Southeast Asian countries, more than 200 million children breathe highly toxic air; and scientists have found that children living near highways faced developmental delays.

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“Children have one major vulnerability: their lungs are developing, so that makes them more vulnerable to diseases or dysfunctional growth,” said Professor Grigg. “Yet when we talk about air pollution, we shouldn’t lose sight of the effects across the whole life course.”

In 2014, a first inquest ruling on Ella’s death found that she had died of acute respiratory syndrome. But a court overturned the ruling last year, and Mr. Barlow on Wednesday, concluding a second inquest, ruled that she “died of asthma contributed to by exposure to excessive air pollution.”

During the weeklong inquest, Ella’s family described her as a lively and well-liked child, who played more than 10 instruments and dreamed of becoming a pilot.

“I had printed off Beethoven’s love letters that day, so that was the last thing I read to her,” her mother, Rosamund Adoo-Kissi-Debrah, said of Ella’s final asthma attack, on Feb. 14, 2013. Ella was pronounced dead in the early hours of the 15th.

“Air pollution is the biggest environmental threat to health in the U.K.,” according to Public Health England, with up to 36,000 people deaths a year “attributed to long-term exposure.” But British authorities have repeatedly failed to comply with guidelines set up by the W.H.O. on levels of nitrogen dioxide and particulate matter — the very small particles most dangerous to human tissues — as well as other legally binding obligations, according to Rose Grogan, a lawyer at 39 Barrister Essex Chambers who specializes on environmental law.

“Today’s ruling comes in the long running context of Britain being in breach of European directives on air pollution,” she said. “The findings per se aren’t legally binding, yet that conclusion could likely pave the way for claims to be brought against the government in civil jurisdictions.”

In his conclusion, Mr. Barlow pointed to a “failure to reduce levels of NO₂ to within the limits set by E.U. and domestic laws which possibly contributed to her death,” referring to nitrogen dioxide.

The death of Ella, who was Black, shed a new, harsh light in Britain on how pollution disproportionately affects minorities and deprived families.

“We are facing the same issue in Britain than in the United States: those who are producing less of the pollutants are the ones getting the most exposure,” Professor Grigg said. “So many areas in London, with larger population of deprived families, are crossed by major roads,” he added. “Air pollution is driving health inequalities.”

Mayor Sadiq Khan has made air pollution a major fight of his tenure, and in October his office stated that the number of Londoners living in areas exceeding the legal limit for nitrogen dioxide had fallen from over two million in 2016 to 119,000 in 2019.

Mr. Khan called for the conclusion on Ella’s death to be “a turning point, so that no one else has to suffer the same heartbreak as Ella’s family.”

Mr. Barlow, the assistant coroner, recommended in his conclusion that populations living in highly polluted areas should receive more information on the risks they faced.

“If she had been given this information,” Mr. Barlow said about Ella’s mother, “She would have taken steps which might have prevented Ella’s death.”