

Ten Important Health Issues in 2005



1. Pollution in Bangkok Reaches Dangerous Levels

Bangkok has become an unhealthy place to live. Noise pollution damages people's hearing, and particulate matter in the air threatens people's respiratory systems, especially if they live near congested streets. The Department of Pollution Control announced in 2005 that noise in excess of 70 decibels, the level at which it begins to threaten health, remains common. The average noise level for a 24 hour period is 72.4 decibels. In congested areas such as Pahurat, Yao warat, Paholyothin, and Ladphrao the average exceeds 80 decibels. One important source of noise is motorbikes, the number of which continues to increase. Some motorbike owners modify their bikes to increase the noise level to around 95 decibels. In terms of air pollution, the main cause is tiny dust particles that can enter the respiratory system. The places with the most pollution are Rama 4, Rama 6, Paholyothin, and Din Daeng.

2. Droughts and Floods

In 2005, Thailand suffered from a string of natural disasters, with the worst floods and the worst droughts in ten years. The droughts began in 2004, when there was insufficient rainfall to fill reservoirs around the country. The droughts reached crisis proportions in March, at which time they had lasted for more than six months. Altogether, 44,519 villages in 71 provinces were affected. More than 3.7 million hectares of agricultural land had insufficient water. Industrial and tourist areas in the East, including Chonburi, Rayong, and Chantaburi suffered severe shortages, and were forced to order water from neighboring areas. Over the next six months, there were a series of floods in northern and southern Thailand. Several provinces in the North were afflicted by a combination of heavy rain and mud slides. Chiang Mai Province suffered four floods, and the neighboring provinces were also badly affected. The reason for the droughts and floods is state development policies that have ignored environmental issues.

3. Suicide

In 2005, 3,913 Thais attempted to kill themselves; of these, 116 died (data from hospital reports.) Every day, an average of 10.7 people try to kill them selves, or almost one every 2 hours. Of the people who try to kill themselves, 1,633, or 42% are aged 15-24. A further 951, or 24%, are aged 25-34. Suicides often feature on the front pages of newspapers. This is worrying, as it can encourage other people to follow suit, particularly young people, who tend to be impulsive. Many young people commit suicide to escape problems in love, by jumping from tall buildings. Young people afraid of the initiation rites at universities, or scared of telling their parents about bad exam results, have shot themselves. One young person jumped from a department store in reaction to being called immature. The Office of Psycho-Social Health in the Ministry of Public Health collected stories about violence from 10 newspapers in 2005, and found 129 stories about suicides, and a further 86 stories about murder-suicides. It is difficult to prove that suicides are prompted by stories in the media. However, one particularly sad case was that of a six-year-old girl, who tried to copy a suicide from a television drama, and narrowly escaped dying.

4. Reforming the Thirty Baht Scheme

Over the past four years, the "Thirty Baht, Treat All Illnesses" universal health insurance scheme has permitted 96% of Thais, or 60.45 million people, to have access to health services. In 2005, the government changed the name of the scheme to "Thirty Baht, Help Thais Avoid Illness." The new name emphasizes prevention over treatment. It recognizes the efforts of many different institutions, such as campaigns by community and workplace organizations to provide health information.

The scheme has some specific objectives. Among small children, dental health will be improved and iodine and iron deficiencies reduced. Pregnant women will receive regular checkups. Female workers will be screened for cervical cancer. Elderly people will receive false teeth and be tested for hypertension. Disabled people will receive special care.

5. Dengue Fever

Dengue fever is a persistent health problem in Thai society and is likely to remain so for many years, until a vaccine is developed. In 2005, there were 44,725 cases of dengue fever, 6,847 more than in 2004. There were 82 deaths, which was 31 more than the previous year. The number of cases in early 2005 was twice as high as number in the same period in 2003. Early indications were that the number of cases would be extremely high in 2005, causing concern throughout the country. Strict measures were implemented throughout the country to stop the spread of the disease, and the number of cases was not as large as had been feared. Dr. Chisanu Pancharoen, from the Faculty of Medicine, Chulalongkorn University, has argued that continuous coverage in the media and proactive measures by health authorities had raised the level of concern throughout the first half of the year. In the event, the total number of cases for the year was not much higher than the year before, and the case fatality rate was lower than in the past.



6. Teenage Motorbike Racers

Groups of teenage males race their bikes at crazy speeds, competing for money or girls. The noise is intolerable for nearby residents. When the police attempt to catch the racers there are often accidents. Mr. Wattana Muengsuk, Minister for Social Development and Human Security, proposed building a racetrack for the motorbike racers to use. The racers would no longer disturb the general public, and the police would no longer have to put themselves in danger trying to apprehend them. The suggestion was welcomed by the teenagers. However, there was widespread opposition among the general public. People argued that it would encourage racing, and that teenagers would start to neglect their studies. On September 25, 2005 a new racetrack was opened in Pathum Thani Province. The number of teenagers using the facility was less than expected, but the noise nevertheless disturbed nearby residents. In reaction to public opposition, the strategy was quietly abandoned.

7. Sustainable Agriculture

Since 2002, the National Health Assembly has stressed the importance of "healthy agriculture." Healthy agriculture means not using agricultural chemicals of any kind, because of the risks that these chemicals pose to farmers and consumers. The National Health Assembly, together with local health assemblies, has organized forums for exchanging experience in healthy agriculture and to promote sustainable farming methods. Groups of like-minded farmers have formed to support sustainable agriculture, organic farming, and mixed cropping. There have been clear benefits for the health of farmers, and the number of people suffering illnesses from agricultural chemicals has been steadily declining. In 1998 there were 4,398 cases, in 2002 there were 2,571 cases, and in 2004 there were only 1,864 cases.

8. Lack of Respect for Human Dignity

One reason for the conflict in Thai society is a lack of respect for fellow humans. Cases of people mistreating one another are reported every day in the newspapers. Examples include fights between vocational students, the use of power to end disputes, and the execution of suspects during the war against drugs. However, the most important example is the violence in the three southernmost provinces. The violence is attributable, ultimately, to a lack of respect for the local culture, including the language and religion, which differ from that of the majority. Dr. Prawes Wasi has referred to these problems as the "disease of not recognizing human dignity." If this phenomenon grows, it will weaken Thai society. The cure, according to Dr. Wasi, is for Thais to change their attitudes towards human dignity. Thais need to have faith in the abilities of all individuals. They need to respect social diversity and the knowledge that people acquire during their lives. If people adopt these views, they will have more self-confidence, and will be able to work together more easily. They will be able to solve social problems, and Thailand will become a more moral society.

9. AIDS Prevalence is Rising among Thai Teenagers

HIV/AIDS is a growing health problem among Thai teenagers. If countermeasures are not taken, the increasing prevalence rates will soon start to have serious effects on the Thai economy and society. In 2005, 18,000 Thais were infected by the HIV virus. Most of these people were teenagers and students aged 15-24. At present, more than 30,000 Thai teenagers are HIV-positive. Of these, 84% contracted the virus from having sex. This is worrying, since many teenagers feel pressure to become sexually active. Conditions are right for rapid spread of the virus,

because sex between fellow students is becoming more common. Use of condoms is still rare, because many students believe that they cannot contract HIV/AIDS from their friends. Increasing numbers of female students are having casual sex. It is also now easy to sell sexual services over the Internet. One measure to address the problem would be to install condom dispensers in areas frequented by students. Increased condom use would also reduce unwanted pregnancies and abortions. However, this measure has both supporters and opponents.

10. Occupational Illnesses and Deaths

Workplace accidents leading to death or disability are increasing. The Social Welfare Office at the Ministry of Labour has published statistics on numbers of people receiving payouts for accidents. According to these statistics, 861 workers were killed in 2004 and 1,372 in 2005, the highest number in 10 years. Activities with frequent accidents include transport, construction, and work with electricity. The most common occupational illnesses include lung diseases, poisoning by animals or insects, and skin and allergy problems. One hazard reported frequently in the media is fires and explosions in factories. These incidents often involve many deaths. Chemical spills can also kill or injure many workers within a short period. If we continue to let these events surprise us, there is no prospect of banishing them from Thai society.