

# Health Watch

## Asthma a severe chronic disease

Asthma is more than just a childhood phase. It is a severe, chronic disease that affects one in 10 children in this country each year.

Each day, approximately 80 Canadian children are admitted to hospital for the treatment of asthma. Parents of asthmatic children often experience a sense of sadness even guilt that their child is burdened with this frustrating disease. This burden may lead to feelings of helplessness.

"With a solid management program, asthma is a disease that can usually be managed quite effectively," said Dr. Granville Nickerson, former Head of Pediatrics at Montreal's Royal Victoria Hospital and a noted lecturer on pediatric asthma.

Dr. Nickerson is currently touring the country on a national, community-based "information crusade" which shows parents of children with asthma how to cope effectively with this disease.

Over the next few months, Dr. Nickerson will speak in more than 15 communities across Canada.

The focus of his information seminars with parents is asthma prevention - achieved through a combined program of family education, new forms of preventative medication, and emotional support. Dr. Nickerson's information program is sponsored by local lung associations, asthma societies and Sandoz Pharmaceuticals.

Asthma is characterized by varying degrees of tightness in the chest, coughing and wheezing. The disease can inhibit a child's ability to breathe; pose a threat to a child's good health; disrupt a child's physical development; upset a child's educational, athletic and social activities; and destroy the quality of life...both for the child and for family members.

Still a misunderstood disease, the myths of asthma include: "It's all in your head," "children grow out of asthma", and - perhaps the most damaging myth - "asthma doesn't kill anymore". The reality is, children who die from asthma did not get the help they needed in the early stages of an attack. "Many attacks can be

predicted hours in advance by understanding how to recognize the warning signals and knowing how to use a peak flow meter (a breathing level detection device)," explains Dr. Nickerson.

In his seminars with parents, Dr. Nickerson stresses the importance of learning about the nature of asthma and understanding how the disease progresses. Dr. Nickerson explains that parents should learn how to anticipate "trigger" factors that stimulate an asthma attack; minimize the child's exposure to common household triggers, such as dust, pets, cigarette smoke, and other respiratory irritants; develop a solid crisis management plan; understand the benefits and side effects of all prescribed medications; and seek out the expertise and assistance of community-based asthma support groups.

"Today," said Dr. Nickerson, "asthma can be controlled and managed quite effectively. I believe our information campaign contributes to this by providing a way to help parents help their children."

## Researchers identify link to SIDS

University of Toronto pathologists have identified a missing link in the cause of sudden death syndrome (SIDS).

Dr. Laurence Becker and Dr. Ernest Cutz studied tissue samples from SIDS victims and found that some infants showed a delay in the maturation of those parts of the nervous system responsible for control of breathing.

"Our data suggests that SIDS is a multi-step process that begins with a developmental delay leading to an unstable cardio-respiratory sleep system between one and four months of life," said Becker.

Becker and Cutz discovered delayed development of neurons in areas of the brain responsible for respiration; of the myelination of the vagus nerve, which plays an important role in the

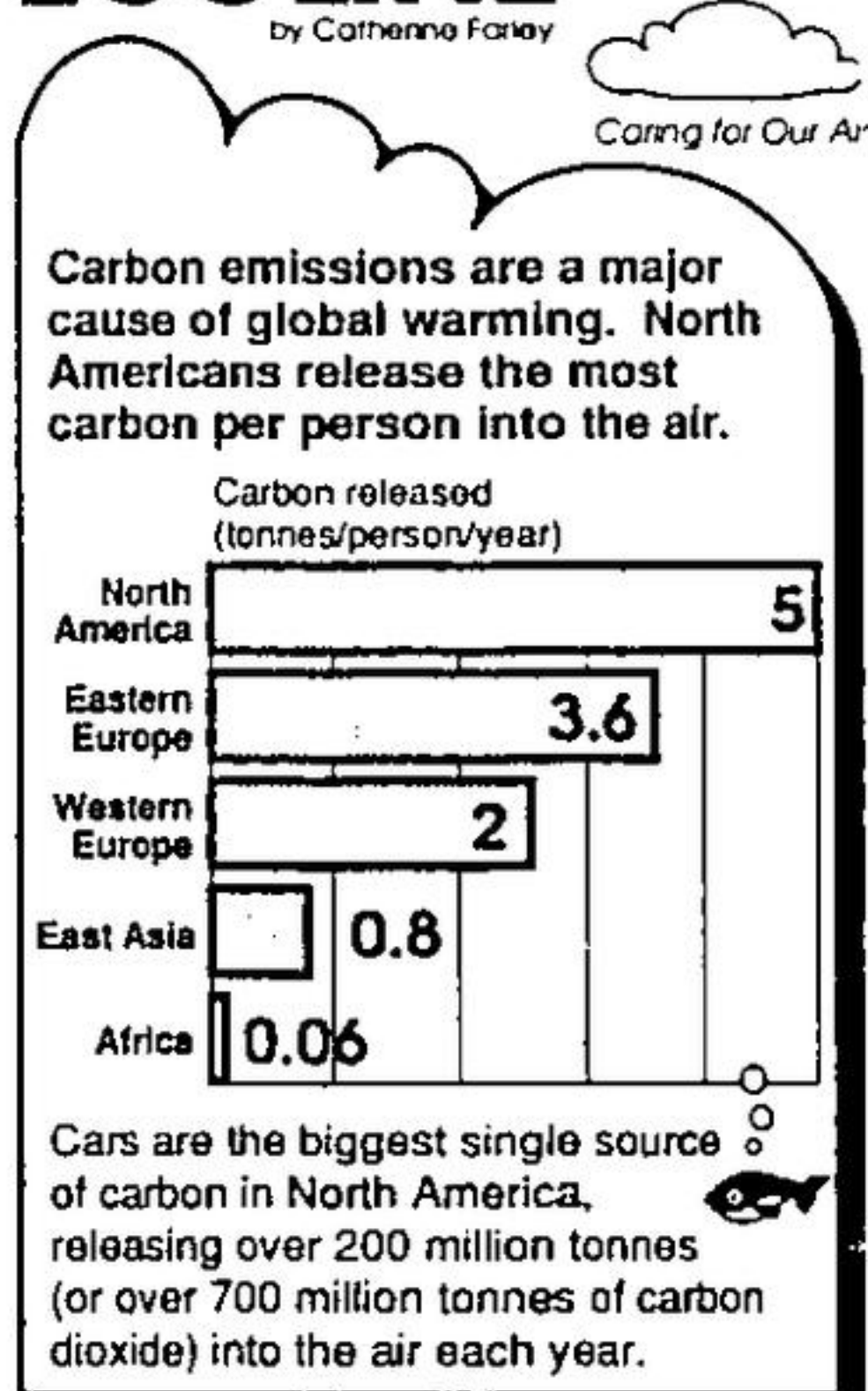
function of the heart and lungs; of the diaphragm, the main muscle of respiration; and of chemoreceptors, which monitor the oxygenation of blood and air.

They suspect an immature respiratory control system could be responsible for subtle disruptions in sleep patterns and breathing, making the infant susceptible to minor triggering factors such as respiratory tract infections which could prove fatal.

"This could help lay the foundation for future studies which may lead to clinically relevant screening tests for those infants at risk," said Becker.

In Canada, SIDS is the major cause of infant deaths between one month and one year of age. It occurs in about 1.2 per 1,000 live births, striking more boys than girls. The highest incidence is in winter.

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