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Contact: Nathaniel Dunford
212-315-8620
ndunford@thoracic.org

American Thoracic Society Applauds EPA on Mercury and Air Toxics Rule

The Environmental Protection Agency today announced standards that will reduce mercury and other toxic emissions from power plants. The rule, known as the Mercury and Air Toxics Rule, will dramatically reduce the amount of pollutants power plants release into the air.

The announcement was made during a press conference, held at Children's National Medical Center, with Administrator Lisa P. Jackson and representatives of medical, public health and clean air advocacy groups. Before these standards, there were no federal limits to the amount of mercury and other toxic pollutants that power plants could emit, even though Congress established through the Clean Air Act of 1990 the framework for the EPA to set limits on hazardous air pollution from electric utility steam generating units. "As a physician who treats many patients with severe lung disease, I know that clean air is critically important to my patients' health and helps to keep them out of emergency departments and hospitals," said Nicholas S. Hill, MD, president of the American Thoracic Society. "Even though there is an expense to controlling toxic emissions, it is far less than the cost of excess illness and death attributable to these toxins." The EPA estimates that the new standards will help prevent 130,000 cases of asthma and 6,300 cases of acute bronchitis among children. It is also estimated to help prevent 11,000 premature deaths and 4,700 heart attacks.

"I know that when the air is bad my patients suffer," said Thomas Ferkol, MD, secretary-treasurer of the American Thoracic Society and professor of pediatrics at the Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis. "Scores of well-designed research studies make it explicitly clear that air pollution can make healthy kids sick and sick kids even sicker."

The final rule will reduce a wide range of toxic chemicals currently emitted from coal- and oil-fired power plants, including mercury, heavy metals, acid gases and particulate matter, which can exacerbate both lung and heart conditions.

The EPA estimates that power companies will spend \$10.9 billion to comply with the final rule, which will be phased in over three years. However, the EPA estimates that when fully implemented, the final rule will save the U.S. economy between \$59 and \$140 billion in healthcare costs annually.

"The technology already exists to reduce emissions from power plants," said Dr. Hill, who is chief of pulmonary, critical care and sleep medicine at Tufts Medical Center. "In fact, more than half of all power plants have already installed pollution control equipment to meet the EPA standard. It is now time for the rest of industry to follow suit and reduce air pollution."