

Climate Change Risks of Fracking Outweigh Benefits

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Featured image: Cuadrilla's Preston New Road fracking site near Blackpool, 1 May 2018. Photo: Ros Wills

The scale of harm from shale gas to health is uncertain, but the danger of exacerbating climate change is not, two professors of public health have warned.

In an [editorial](#) for this week's British Medical Journal, David McCoy and Patrick Saunders said:

"Although we can't be certain about the scale of harm that shale gas production will bring to local communities and the immediate environment, it will exacerbate climate change. And on these grounds alone, the risks clearly and considerably outweigh any possible benefits."

Dr McCoy, professor of global public health at Barts and London School of Medicine, and Dr Saunders, visiting professor of public health at University of Staffordshire, dismissed industry arguments about the environmental benefits of shale gas in the UK.

They said:

"Although it may offer some environmental benefit if produced and used efficiently, and if it displaces "dirtier" sources of energy like coal from the energy mix, this does not hold true for countries like the UK that have already phased out coal.

"The argument that shale gas is relatively clean and can assist with our transition to a sustainable energy system is thin, if not hollow. It also implies an unacceptable indifference from proponents of the industry to the global threat posed by climate change."

They added:

"Methane, the main component of shale gas, is a potent greenhouse gas that leaks directly into the atmosphere at different points in the production and supply line, producing an additional global warming effect."

The academics have previously co-authored two health impact assessments on shale gas for the health charity, *Medact*.

In this week's editorial, they said the hazards and effects on health of shale gas developments depended on many factors. These included, they said, how many shale gas wells were drilled and over what land area, the size and proximity of local populations; how the industry behaved and was regulated, as well as local factors.

They conceded that shale gas production may not be a population level health threat on the scale of tobacco, sugar, alcohol, or motor vehicle pollution. But they added:

"Some evidence shows that it increases the risk of negative health and environmental outcomes, including increased risk of cancer, adverse birth outcomes, respiratory disease, and mental wellbeing."

Public health review

Public Health England (PHE) published a review in 2014 of the potential public health impacts of pollution resulting from shale gas extraction. This concluded:

"The potential risks to public health from exposure to the emissions associated with shale gas extraction will be low if the operations are properly run and regulated."

This report has been criticised for looking only at emissions from shale gas sites and for failing to take account of the most recent research.



Dr Frank Rugman and Claire Stephenson delivering a petition to Public Health England in August 2017

There have been calls for an updated report, including a petition with nearly 6,000 signatures delivered to PHE in August 2017.

In May this year, the Energy Minister, Lord Henley, said

PHE “continue to review evidence on the potential public health impacts of emissions associated with shale gas extraction and have not currently identified any significant evidence that would make it change its views”.

PHE told DrillOrDrop a team of three-to-four staff focus “part of their time on onshore oil and gas”. They also have responsibility for assessing impacts from chemical incidents, air quality and industrial emissions.

The organisation said there was “an on-going process to identify new peer-reviewed papers” on shale gas health impacts. These were “assessed, summarised and reviewed to identify any new areas of public health concern”.

PHE confirmed that it had not published any further papers but “continues to review the evidence on emissions associated with shale gas extraction.”

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