

Don't strangle the cat!

Asthma is prevented neither by having lots of cats or by strangling them all! This was one of the conclusions from an evening of discussion about asthma at Karolinska Institute in Solna.

First a film was shown about current asthma research. Among other things, it described how children who live in the countryside and are exposed to dust from barns are less likely to develop asthma.

“But it's important to point out that adults who live and work in such environments run a much greater risk of developing serious lung diseases,” said **Anne Renström**, a senior research fellow and medical student who is researching allergies to fur-bearing animals and allergy prevention in schools and work places.

Maria Ingemansson, chief physician and expert on allergies in children, expressed her view that asthma research has shifted back and forth from researchers believing they understand everything to not understanding anything at all. Today the research is somewhere in the middle and the mystery of asthma is far from solved.

Kerstin Sundell – a nurse and PhD student who is researching how young asthma sufferers take in information about their disease – and the other two researchers commented on the film. The three also talked about their own research and answered research related questions. Topics covered included the difficulty in diagnosing asthma, links to other lung diseases, the connection to food allergies and whether the way in which food is handled and cleaning habits have affected the growth of asthma in Sweden.

The participants sat around small tables and talked about how society could be better adapted for asthma sufferers and how asthma and allergies can be prevented. Discussions were interspersed with practical tests: PEF variability and spirometry to check airways and breathing capacity, quick allergy tests as well as skin-prick tests for birch and timothy grass.

Moderators **Cissi Askwall**, Communications Director at Public & Science (Vetenskap & Allmänhet), and **Anders Sahlman**, Project Manager at Public & Science, asked each table what conclusions they had reached. Suggestions included a total ban on smoking, banning perfumes in shopping centres, making it mandatory for children to attend summer camps to be around livestock, implementing information campaigns in pre-schools, equipping all stables with showers and changing rooms, investing more in asthma research and creating more forums for meetings and discussion.

Hanna Vihavainen, Research Fund Secretary at the Swedish Asthma and Allergy Association, said in conclusion that suggestions are valuable to the association as it works to improve conditions for asthma and allergy sufferers.

The evening of discussion took place on 13 April 2010 and was part of the EU **ComScience** project, which is testing different ways to communicate science and health related research to the general public. The organisers were Public & Science in cooperation with Karolinska Institute and the Swedish Asthma and Allergy Association.