

How to ask for assistance from your local council

Michellina Van Loder

Reprinted with permission from her blog: <http://the-labyrinth.com/2012/09/30/how-to-ask-for-assistance-from-your-local-council/>

The air we breathe, quite often, contains pollutants, we're all aware of that; however, for some of us, we're reminded of this more than the average person could ever possibly imagine. The prevalence of asthma, sensitivities to chemicals, and illnesses related to industrial and urban pollution could serve as a wake-up call to the world, but up until the last ten years or so, people like me, with my types of symptoms (that for different people—depending on what part of the world they live in—have led to diagnoses such as chronic allergies, Environmental Illness (EI), Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS), and chemical sensitivities (CS)), have been a part of our society that has been shoved out of the forest. But slowly that is all changing... I can see a shift in people's thinking, just in the blogs I read and subscribe to. And I can see a shift in consciousness's of the people I meet: the mask I wear over my face, and the explanation I give for wearing it, never fails to bring up environmental issues. (Another good thing about wearing the damn thing, I suppose.) I realise that I'm not alone. My problems are minuscule compared to those of the planet. Luckily, we are all in this together!

It is my belief that the best thing we can do for ourselves is to be pro-active in our approach to dealing with our problems; and to realise that it's okay to ask others to help us. For me, this has meant contacting my local council and asking for their assistance. I've done this before, and now, I'm getting quite good at self-advocating. With doctors, dentists, schools, teachers, even vets. This used to be an act fraught with anxiety; each phone call, or meeting, I'd spend days making lists, planning what I would say, running over each possible outcome, working out what my next step would be. Now, I just pick up the phone, and then afterwards, follow up with an email. (I've learnt the hard way that *all* promised outcomes need to be in writing.)

This is part of the letter that I emailed to my local council this month (you see, when they mow the grass and spray whatever it is that they spray, they do it en-masse, and the last few months its been affecting me hugely):

Please find attached a letter from my specialist stating my condition and the chemicals (for which I have been tested for), that affect me. The symptoms that I experience are managed, primarily by avoidance; to do this I need Brimbank City Council and Melton Shire Council's assistance: the area over the back fence boundary belongs to Melton Council and over the front belongs to Brimbank.

Today, I have experienced health problems in regards to lawnmower fumes, and possibly herbicides

(I'm not sure if there were herbicides but do need to be careful) arriving on the wind, coming through my open front door and windows; Roundup has been problematic for me in the past, so if I can take steps to avoid breathing this in as well, I will.

It is not the smell, but the chemicals contained in these product's/fuel's vapours that affect my eyes, sinuses and breathing—and continue to for some time afterwards. Sometimes for days.

Can I please ask if I can have a 24 hour notice of mowing and pesticide/herbicide spraying so that I can take the action of keeping my doors and windows closed, and as well, not hang washing out on those days?

Also, if you are able to forward this to the person in charge of burn notifications that would be most helpful too. I suffer greatly on those days, and have even taken to sealing around windows with painter's masking tape, so that I can keep the smoke out; however, it is often too late to prevent symptoms from occurring. If I could have forewarning, then I can take this action, the day before.

The best way to contact me is by text or email. My address is ...

Thanking you in advance for any assistance you can offer,

Michellina Van Loder

I am confident, I will receive the help I need. The letter, most likely, will be passed on to the Parks Department: the people who work there, deal with the environment, and are, usually, all to aware of situations where people, animals and their habitats are affected by the external environments around them. Besides, I'm in the third generation of people who have had to deal/live/survive with these types of problems. People *are* becoming more aware; therefore, making it easier to get the help/accommodations that people sensitive to chemicals need!

Below is a list of things you (or someone you know) can do to enlist the help of others:

- Be pro-active (I know that's a vague statement but just saying it inspires me to facilitate the help that I need. The idea that I can do something, and then following through with actions (anything) gives me a sense of empowerment.)
- Realise you are not the first person to have to deal with trying to control the air you breathe! That grain of truth makes it all feel a little more 'normal'; therefore, it feels more 'doable' too!

- Take notes on what happened, and when, your symptoms and anything else that coincides with the problem, because without that, it's difficult to follow through with a back plan/further action (see final point for the back up plan).
- As often as you can, get the promised outcome in writing, unfortunately, we live in a world where people (some, not all, thankfully) can say one thing and do another.
- Always be polite, any type of aggression, or sadly, over emotional reactions like crying, even when something has made you ill, is not going to help. It could even work against you. (For me, practising good manners, and being really, really polite, purely for the purpose of controlling another human being's actions is a challenge in itself. When it feels as if my head might explode from sinus pressure and breathing itself is a painful activity, I go into survival mode. Hence my hibernation of late.)
- Don't make calls when you're unwell, unless you feel able to handle the situation well, it's best to write down the specifics and call later on, when you feel better!
- This one is most important: get a letter from your doctor/or specialist. Don't get one from your natural therapist, we don't live in that type of world (not in Australia anyway—not yet!). A doctor's letter explaining your condition, what affects you, and how it affects you, can go a long way in gaining you the understanding that you need. I've quoted a part of mine below.
- This one, is the most important, remember: You are not alone, by changing this 'one thing', by helping to shape this 'one person's' idea about the impact of their chemical use and it's impact on others, essentially, you are helping other people like yourself, and future generations. (If I were to get all 'fluffy' on you, and say, "We are like this for a reason, there is something bigger to this than our own pain and suffering." Perhaps, I'd be right, or maybe I'd just be getting all fluffy from all the inspirational blogs I've been reading of late! (2012, change in shift of energy. All that?!))
- And, be prepared to take responsibility for your own health, and make the necessary changes to your living arrangements. Whether this be buying an air purifier, sealing your windows and doors with painters masking tape (a type of tape that can be used to seal around windows and doors, keeping irritants/allergens out, without peeling the paint off, when removed), or moving to another location, you can do it. (Yes, we have been victimised by the use of chemicals that have made us ill, but by taking action/asking for someone to help us, we automatically take the first step from the position of victim to that of a survivor, and that's the essence of being proactive when it comes to our health.)
- Contacting your local council, or Human Rights Organisation (in Australia, it's HREOC), both are important options to keep in mind also (Hence keeping a list of 'what' and 'when').

My letter is from my treating Immunologist, Dr Colin Little, in Melbourne Australia (he's an awesomely knowledgeable doctor when it comes to allergies,

particularly chemical ones):

Michellina Van Loder has been a patient of mine [x amount of years]. She presented with dryness of the eyes, nasal pain, headache, musculoskeletal pain and nausea. Extensive testing has shown the basis for these symptoms is adverse reactions to low level chemical exposures, levels encountered in everyday life. Among the chemicals she is particularly sensitive are solvents, hydrocarbons in vehicle exhaust, perfume, and nitrogen dioxide, which is produced by high temperature combustion, for example from motor vehicles, gas heaters and open fires.

The management of her sensitivity to chemicals is primarily by avoidance. Miss Van Loder has made major changes to her living situation to keep to a minimum her exposure to chemicals.

There is more, but that's the gist of it. And this letter, (and a few others that are 'situation specific') is used to help me to get others to help me. I'm still not failed to be amazed at how a letter from a doctor can help in situations where decisions by company/government organisations are based on bureaucracy!

Update: since writing this post, I've received a reply and an offer of assistance. More about that coming soon...

DO YOU HAVE A PHOTO YOU COULD SHARE?

AESSRA Inc. has started a collection of photos showing aspects of life with MCS. For example:

- equipment such as reading boxes, computer boxes, air purifiers, water filters/distillers
- wearing masks and respirators
- airing things
- other things we do to avoid/reduce chemical exposure
- our homes (or homelessness)
- special diets
- whatever MCS means to you

Photos from this collection will be used for:

- a virtual photo exhibition on our website
- posters for displays at libraries, community health centres etc
- to send out with press releases and make available for other publications
- to include in *Sensitivity Matters*, either in a group or single images to show, for example, how people read books and magazines without exposures
- information sheets or booklets
- other educational and publicity purposes

You will need to formally give AESSRA permission to use your photo(s). If your photo shows people who can be identified they will also need to give permission for the photo to be used. A photo release form is available from "Files" on the AESSRA forum website or contact AESSRA to have one (or more) posted to you. Please email your photos to photos@aessra.org or post them to AESSRA Inc. Please also either scan and email your completed photo release form to photos@aessra.org or post it to AESSRA Inc.