Carcinogens Fatality Report

In a far-reaching human rights case, Ella Kissi-Debrah could become the first person to have toxic air given as their cause of death – and finally make this silent killer visible

From a tiny office on the top floor of the old town hall in Catford, south-east London, Rosamund Kissi-Debrah is leading a campaign to push air pollution on to the political agenda as never before. It has been claimed for years that pollution caused by motor vehicles, especially diesel cars, buses and Lorries, is a killer, with talk of tens of thousands of premature deaths. But the number was always abstract, the identities of the dead unknown. Now, for the first time, campaigners have the name of a young victim they say died as a direct result of air pollution: Ella Roberta Kissi-Debrah, Rosamund's daughter, and if they can prove it they believe an invisible killer will become all too real.

Ella, who suffered from severe asthma, died in 2013 at the age of nine. She had been suffering asthma-related seizures like the one which killed her for three years. Kissi-Debrah says her daughter, who grew up and went to school close to the busy South Circular Road in Lewisham, had cough syncope – a condition usually associated with long-distance lorry drivers who'd been driving for decades. "I couldn't work out why a nine-year-old child should have that," she tells me.

While Ella was alive, Kissi-Debrah sought a medical explanation for the condition. Now she is convinced it was related to air pollution, arguing that her daughter's lungs had been weakened over the course of her short life, with pollution spikes then triggering the attacks that repeatedly hospitalised her in the final three years. "When she first became ill, I just went to the GP and got normal antibiotics and thought 'a few days and that will be it'," recalls Kissi-Debrah. "But she developed this cough and it was really strange-sounding, like a whooping cough."

The cough persisted. On the third visit to the surgery the doctor

referred her to a specialist, and eventually Great Ormond Street took over Ella’s treatment. “By New Year’s Eve 2010 she was in intensive care,” says Kissi-Debrah. “It now turns out that all we were doing for the next two years was maintaining her. She would have times when the cough disappeared, but it was never long enough.” Kissi-Debrah contends that the damage her daughter suffered to her lungs in the early years of her life condemned her to death.

Supported by the human rights lawyer Jocelyn Cockburn, Kissi-Debrah is pressing for a new inquest into her daughter’s death that for the first time would make it explicit that pollution was the cause. To get a second inquest, they will need to show there is new evidence that was not taken into account at the original investigation in 2014. Step forward Stephen Holgate, professor of immunopharmacology at the University of Southampton, who has taken a fresh look at Ella’s medical records and concluded there is a “real prospect that without illegal levels of air pollution Ella would not have died”.