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PRESS RELEASE: 5th June 2020

A window of opportunity to improve the environment in which we live

Family doctors have remained available during the COVID-19 pandemic to preserve the physical, social and psychological wellbeing of all citizens in respect to all the medical conditions which affect the health of those involved and their families, including SARS-CoV-2 issues.

The MCFD calls national and local authorities to put into action already available and more recommendations to improve the state of the environment as a means to give psychological and physical respite and wellbeing to our society after weeks of siege. So much so now that the general public is aware of the merits of life with less traffic emissions, congestion and noise, is more sensitive to the need for more open spaces for leisure and recreation and has more experience of the beauty of nature.

The Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air has recently issued a report showing that 11,000 deaths in Europe were avoided due to less combustion of fossil fuel during the COVID-19 pandemic. The European Environment Agency's Air Quality reports have over the years reported the number of premature deaths in Malta that are attributable to human-made pollution of our air and hence that number can be reduced. Pollution of our air with particulates, nitrogen oxides, sulphur dioxide, volatile organic compounds and ozone leads to cardiovascular and respiratory morbidity and mortality. The electricity generating sector has made a lot of improvements in the past years and is expected to improve further. On the other hand, the transport sector is not only the biggest contributor to air pollution but has increased gradually and steadily its contribution. Sensible recommendations to decrease traffic and its emissions have been aired in the public domain but current actions need to be stepped up and new actions need to materialise.

The need for physical, social and mental wellbeing of individuals and their families and friends has come to the forefront in the attempts of many to seek respite from the stress and anxiety arising from drastic changes in lifestyles, most notably social distancing from family and friends, businesses and enterprises walking on a tightrope, substantial decrease in family income, and employment issues. Many sought the relief of leisure parks, natural parks, nature reserves, coast, beaches, countryside and rural areas. But it

was soon evident how the rampant urban sprawl of the last decades has left us with less quiet, clean green and blue areas than is desirable, and consequently the suitable areas were more crowded than wished for in the circumstances. Urban areas are visible from about 90% of the territory, about a fifth of the coastline does not retain its natural form and about half of our 193-km coastline is intensely utilized, including about a quarter which is built-up. Sensible suggestions for new nature reserves and environmental leisure parks have been aired in the public domain and valid calls for an improved upkeep of our rural areas and open countryside need to be taken up more on board.

The social distancing from family, relatives, friends and workmates has erased the trademark social events that make most of us happy and has left individuals living in our villages and towns trying to find comfort in urban sites that have been allowed to become ever more aesthetically ugly by successive policy makers. It is noteworthy that in the last few years some kilometres of roads amenable to safe use by pedestrians and cyclists have materialised after so much reluctance. More recently initiatives for children-friendly temporary car free zones and green landscaping of our villages have been announced. But serious permanent attempts to improve the urban infrastructure and engineering, making our alleys, streets and roads pleasant to the eye and comfortable and safe to use, and creation of more urban open spaces are shortcoming.

The MCFD recommends that pilot projects, schemes and initiatives are launched now with an eye to make them permanent after the end of the pandemic. The general public is encouraged to approach their parliamentary and local council representatives so that all stakeholders can come together, shed their silo mentality and, as shown during the present COVID-19 scenario, continue to work as one united country towards agreed targets that promote sustainable development and wellbeing.

Footnotes:

The Malta College of Family Doctors (MCFD) is a Voluntary Organisation (VO/0973) that strives to improve the academic and clinical performance of family doctors (known as “it-tobba tal-familja” or “general practitioners”) and the standards of primary health care in our country. www.mcfid.org.mt

CREA Report can be found here: <https://energyandcleanair.org/air-pollution-deaths-avoided-in-europe-as-coal-oil-plummet/>

European Environment Agency Air Quality Report 2019 can be found here: <https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/air-quality-in-europe-2019>