

EDITORIAL

The noise/stress/health connection

If the dishes in your china closet rattled every few minutes; if your telephone conversations were constantly interrupted by thunderous overhead blasts; if you dreaded the warm weather, because the noise from low-flying planes made outdoor activities unpleasant at best, you might find the situation rather stressful.

Such is the predicament of many residents of the Island's northwestern communities, where planes departing Newark Airport's Runway 22 have been a constant source of noise pollution.

Hundreds of planes – sometimes as many as 60 during a two-hour period – roar over Arlington, Mariners Harbor and other residential neighborhoods each day at altitudes as low as 1,500 feet. Those who live in this jarring flight path have described the problem as anywhere from annoying to unbearable.

But the problem must be borne, according to the Port Authority, which operates the airport, and the Federal Aviation Administration, which determines acceptable noise levels.

PA's latest round of monitoring shows the average daily noise level in the area ranged from 63 to 74 decibels – just below the danger threshold of 75 decibels set by FAA. At this level, officials maintain, the plane noise would have to be sustained over a period of time, say, a year, in order to damage a person's hearing.

But couldn't intermittent levels of 63 to 74 decibels, endured over a longer period of time, say 10 or 20 years, be damaging? And what about the effect of this noise on nonauditory health problems? And what about that stress?

Island audiologist Jerry Cammarata wants FAA to launch a full scale investigation into the connection between noise exposure and a variety of medical and psychological problems.

FAA says previous research shows a connection "has not been conclusively demonstrated" and that the effects of airport noise on health are "difficult to quantify."

Cammarata admits that the causes and effects of many medical and psychological problems are subjective and can be influenced by a number of factors. But he also offers documentation in scientific journals that shows noise can affect physiological functions.

Obviously, we're not doctors or psychologists. But we do know that stress can trigger, contribute to, and/or exacerbate some medical conditions. And we know that noise and stress can sometimes be related.

Witness the case of the vacationing Maryland man, whose malfunctioning house alarm went off for five solid days recently. His neighbors complained of headaches and claimed they couldn't eat or sleep; some literally wanted to kill him. Car alarms can also drive one to distraction. And we all know

that the constant din of barking dogs, blasting stereos, crying babies, and horn-honking motorists can rattle almost anyone's nerves.

Is it possible, then, that the continuous roar of overhead planes is related, as Cammarata feels, to respiratory, digestive, cardiovascular and psychological problems?

FAA says there is not enough evidence to warrant further study. We say there is.

