

A New Chapter in NIEHS-WHO Collaboration (3-part series)

Dr. Maria Neira, WHO (Part 2)

Anne Johnson: This is Global Environmental Health Chat, the podcast that explores environmental health issues that transcend national boundaries. I'm your host Anne Johnson, and this podcast is produced by the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences.

Today we're taking a look at the beginning of a new chapter in the relationship between NIEHS and the World Health Organization. NIEHS was recently designated as a WHO Collaborating Center for Environmental Health Sciences.

Our guest is Dr. Maria Neira. She's the director of WHO's Department of Public Health and Environment in Geneva. She says the new collaborating center has important work to do to help reduce the burden of disease around the world.

Maria Neira: Environmental health is a critical public health issue at the moment. We know that at least 25 percent of the global burden of diseases is associated or attributable to modifiable environmental health factors. We could reduce by 25 percent of the global burden of diseases if we tackle the right environmental factors and together we will be doing better.

Johnson: There are a lot of environmental factors included in that 25 percent. She says the new collaborating center can help us begin to tackle some big-impact challenges.

Neira: Among the immediate priorities that we will be focusing on this collaboration will be: the special focus will be on children because we think that they are the most vulnerable group; then, indoor pollution, as we recognize that this is a major health issue affecting now the very poor populations; electronic waste is one of the emerging issues; as well as climate change. And of course we need to do more work in the developmental origins of health and disease, where these collaborations among different research organizations and policy makers is extremely important.

Johnson: She said building those bridges between research and policy is something near and dear to WHO. And NIEHS has a strong track record of supporting research that can help inform practical decision making to improve public health.

Neira: We need to keep a global environmental health agenda very much high on the interest of policy makers. And to do that we need to translate research into pragmatic, practical, and concrete recommendations for countries. Altogether, I think one of our main objectives of all the Collaborative Centers is to raise more awareness of environmental health about the critical importance of tackling the root causes of diseases, being clean air, access to safe water, better monitoring and strategic management of chemicals and healthy urban environments and better tackling with climate change at the root of the major determinants of our health and the factors we have work with.

Johnson: She said this collaboration can help enhance the use of cutting-edge research, especially for countries that lack a strong research infrastructure of their own. Dr. Neira also sees NIEHS's training and

education expertise as an important asset for the partnership. She also hopes to build on the Institute's large network of partnerships with universities and other institutions.

Neira: We see this partnership with a great achievement and we are very excited. NIEHS has been a leader of environmental health research, so it will be fundamental for us to use that leadership, knowledge, and experience at global level and then translating that research into implementation and then contributing to alleviate people's poverty and reduce environmental health burden of diseases. So it's a great opportunity to have this partnership because we will have even more capacity to achieve those targets on environmental health.

Johnson: The partnership builds on three decades of successful collaboration and provides a focal point for taking advantage of opportunities to understand and address key global environmental health issues. Thanks again to Dr. Maria Neira for highlighting those opportunities and sharing the WHO perspective with us. In the final podcast in our series on the NIEHS-WHO Collaborating Center for Environmental Health Sciences, we'll hear from the WHO's regional office for the Americas, the Pan American Health Organization.

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