

**Report 95: Environmental Health Literacy**

**Convener:** Carol Stroebe

**Brief History:**

We have a long way to go for people to understand environmental health.

**Why is this topic important now?**

There is a critical need to educate the public about environmental health. Conveying environmental health information is more challenging than others; no smoking gun, no trail of blood.

Media doesn't know how to cover science.

Public doesn't understand probability; doesn't understand science; doesn't understand risk.

**Discussion:**

A lot of databases @ NLM exist and are used by the public; NLM also has materials for kids.

General public doesn't have a basic understanding of environmental health and there is a range of definitions.

NIEHS has some tools, has office of communications.

Should be a simple model that should be adopted by NIEHS to convey to the public, the exposures and health outcomes studied by NIEHS; something like a food plate for environmental health; has a brand, a long-term impact. And will help increase visibility of NIEHS

NIH has a health literacy study section; very few environmental health proposals that go thru it. Been around for 3-4 years; lots of health literacy research projects. Very few in the area of environmental health. Another question is: If they went thru the study section, would NIEHS fund them? Such projects would be more in the social science realm.

Infectious disease would be the low-hanging fruit; chemical toxicity in the environment is difficult to understand.

Difficult to work on occupational health unless it's acute.

Birnbaum has been very good at educating policy makers.

NIEHS could coordinate, collaborating with other agencies (CDC, EPA) and groups (SOT, etc.) that could contribute.

Targeted development of educational programs and materials.

It's easy for people in scientific community to talk to each other. Outside of NIH, CDC, needs to be some sense of how to communicate and how to understand it.

Need to reach out as broadly as possible to different groups, different partners; that's the long term goal.

Policy makers also need to be an audience.

Possibly some grants from PEHP that looked at how you educate the political slice of the pie. They are supplemental grants to a larger grant.

Messages really need to be tailored to the specific audiences. Communications, training, etc., all come under definition of health literacy.

Not a systematic approach of what are the priority audiences, the most effective ways, and how to measure how successful we are, don't know how well we're enhancing health literacy.

EX-Tox-net came out of toxicology extension to help workers and others exposed to pesticides. Funding for that dried up years ago. Is still a Website with a caretaker; it's a valuable resource. May be a prototype.

NJ DOH has great fact sheets on certain substances; we need more of them.

Getting the public, journalists, policy makers, etc., to understand studies, interpret studies, etc.; would make a big difference.

Are there educational programs, fellowships? Student groups do come in to visit; tour the labs, understand what EH workshop is about. Teacher's workshop that lasts a day; curriculum focused. . .

What about journalists, policymakers, Congressional staff

Things have been periodic, not that structured, could perhaps that should be more structured, more frequent

More town hall meetings?

Taking science to different communities, not just having NC audiences come in.

SOT had a program (Smithsonian Resident Associate Program); a full day program; very successful.

Next SOT meeting in SF is toxicology and the media, toxicology and journalists

How to improve science journalists? Trade journals have been doing a better job covering environmental health; since Birnbaum came on board, seeing increased mention of NIEHS in the media and increased quality of reports.

Leadership at NIEHS has increased visibility thru op-eds. In past, have not pro-actively sought the limelight. It could be a double-edged sword. . .

**Recommendations:**

NIEHS increase sessions at scientific meetings (SOT, APHA, ATS, ISEE, ISES, etc.), and at relevant meetings such as the Society of Environmental Journalists, on environmental health.

Create partnerships at universities around the nation for eg., NIEHS director to speak at public health schools and elsewhere in academic communities

Participate in “science cafes” – support scientists speaking at those.

Support environmental health programs at exploratory and science museums, children’s discovery museums, etc.

Continue efforts to engage with the media.

Support/foster a network (eg. including NIEHS grantees) to generate a list of best practices on increasing environmental health literacy, and having others help to get the environmental health concepts out.

Use the Institute’s worker health and safety training program as a model for, eg., children’s environmental health worker training for, eg., school administrators and facility managers, child care professionals, etc.

Should be a simple model adopted by NIEHS to convey environmental health concepts to the public, the exposures and health outcomes studied by NIEHS -- something like a food plate for environmental health; has a brand, a long-term impact

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