

Capitol Hill events put spotlight on environmental connections to cancer

By Paula Whitacre

The impact of environmental factors on cancer, especially women's cancers, received high-profile attention at two events Sept. 19 on Capitol Hill. In the afternoon, attendees took part in a roundtable discussion co-sponsored by the H. John Heinz III Center for Science, Economics and the Environment; Congressional Families Cancer Prevention Program of the Prevent Cancer Foundation; and Executive Women in Government. During the evening session, participants were treated to a panel and film presentation at the U.S. Capitol Visitor Center Orientation Theater.

NIEHS and NTP Director Linda Birnbaum, Ph.D., made presentations at both events, where she emphasized the role of environmental health research in understanding the causes of cancer.

Linked Video

[Watch Drescher talk about Cancer Schmancer, and its goal of saving lives through prevention and early detection of cancer \(04:38\).](#)

Cancer as the great equalizer

The roundtable, "Women's Cancers: New Science, New Activism," attracted a standing-room-only audience that featured actress and activist Fran Drescher, and included a number of wives of current and former legislators. Purposefully set up as a bipartisan briefing, the event co-chairs consisted of Susan Allen, Debbie Dingell, Diana Enzi, and Lisa McGovern. Allen, wife of former Governor and Republican Senator from Virginia George Allen, introduced Drescher to the audience.

After a misdiagnosis and, ultimately, successful treatment for uterine cancer 13 years ago, Drescher began to write and speak about her experience. The organization she founded, [Cancer Schmancer](http://www.cancerschmancer.org/), which is also the title of her best-selling book, focuses on prevention, early detection, and policy change. Describing Cancer Schmancer's Detox Your Home campaign, Drescher urged the audience to be mindful of toxins in, on, and around them, referring to food, personal care, and cleaning and gardening products.

Birnbaum highlighted NIEHS research on women's cancers, including the Breast Cancer and Environment Research Program, co-funded with the National Cancer Institute; Sister Study; Fibroid Growth Study; and others. Stressing that "you can't change your genes, but you can change your environment," she pointed out that environmental factors may account for at least two-thirds of U.S. cancer cases.

"That's why environmental health research is so important," Birnbaum said. "It gives us vital information on how we could change our environment, to prevent disease and promote wellness."

H. Kim Lyerly, M.D., a breast oncologist from the Duke University School of Medicine, discussed how environmental factors may influence not only cancer development, but also therapy.

"Laboratories around the world are making this connection," Lyerly said. "Many forms of therapy that are preventing recurrences, and keeping you from having a metastases or expansion of a tumor, are also influenced by the same environmental signals that initiated cancer in heretofore normal cells."

Dingell, a civic leader and wife of Rep. John Dingell, D-Mich., reminded the audience that efforts by congressional spouses on women's health issues have borne results.

"Thirty years ago, we didn't use the word breast, and women were not included in federally funded research," she said. "We as [congressional] spouses have a platform that we can use to educate in our states and districts."



Drescher, left, listened to Birnbaum describe NIEHS funding used to study women's cancers. (Photo courtesy of April Bennett)



During the evening panel and film showing, Deutch, left, discussed the role of the private sector in reducing environmental hazards in consumer products. (Photo courtesy of Paula Whitacre)

The power of the marketplace

Later in the day, Birnbaum joined Rep. Ted Deutch, D-Fla., on a panel, followed by a screening of "Unacceptable Levels," a documentary on the presence of environmental hazards in everyday life.

Deutch described legislation that he seeks to introduce in Congress, to establish a program that uses market forces to push known carcinogens out of household products. Drescher voiced support for what she called Deutch's non-regulatory, revenue-earning, bipartisan initiative.

During this session, Birnbaum focused on NIEHS research on cancer, and talked about research related to lung cancer, asbestos, and pesticides. She explained why NIEHS has prioritized support for research into combined exposures.

She concluded by saying, "The choices we make regarding the foods we eat, exercise, and the chemicals we are exposed to, will make a difference in our wellness. We need to take ownership of those choices and make the necessary changes to have healthier lives."

(Paula Whitacre is a contract writer with the NIEHS office in Bethesda, Md.)



Before the briefing, event hosts, co-sponsors, and presenters gathered for a photo in the Dirksen Senate Office Building. From left, are Lindi Harvey, director of the Heinz Center Bipartisan Initiative for the Prevention of Breast Cancer; Lisa McGovern, executive director of the Congressional Families Cancer Prevention Program; Conn Nugent, president of the Heinz Center; Birnbaum; Dingell; Drescher; Allen; Shoshana Grove, president of Executive Women in Government; Reta Jo Lewis, past president of Executive Women in Government; and Ljerly. (Photo courtesy of Heinz Center)

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