

## World Health Organization and NIEHS launch new collaboration

By Paula Whitacre

NIEHS and the World Health Organization (WHO) began a new chapter in their decades-long partnership Feb. 20, with the official launch of the NIEHS-WHO Collaborating Centre for Environmental Health Science. NIEHS welcomed Maria Neira, M.D., director of the WHO Public Health and Environment Department, as keynote speaker. The event took place in conjunction with the winter meeting of the National Advisory Environmental Health Sciences Council (see [story](#)).

"By joining forces, NIEHS and WHO will help to ensure that cutting edge environmental health science will be translated into effective public health interventions to improve health around the world," said NIEHS and NTP Director Linda Birnbaum, Ph.D.

### Building bridges

As a WHO Collaborating Centre, NIEHS joins a [network](http://www.who.int/collaboratingcentres/en/) (<http://www.who.int/collaboratingcentres/en/>) of academic and scientific institutions around the world dedicated to information exchange and technical cooperation.

"Even as the global health community shifts its focus from infectious to non-communicable diseases, the critical role of environmental exposures in adding to the global chronic disease burden is not well appreciated. The Collaborating Centre provides a new and unique platform for NIEHS to address this gap in awareness," said [John Balbus, M.D.](#), NIEHS senior advisor for global health and head of the new center.

WHO is the United Nations authority for directing and coordinating global health promotion efforts. It is responsible for providing leadership on health matters, shaping the research agenda, setting norms and standards, articulating evidence-based policy options, providing technical support to countries, and monitoring and assessing health trends.

WHO operates six regional offices, with Collaborating Centres located in more than 80 countries. The member states of WHO comprise most countries of the world, providing an extensive network of health experts and health ministries that the Collaborating Centres can access for research translation and communication. In addition to working directly with WHO, the centers collaborate with each other in formal and informal networks on topics ranging from adolescent health to zoonoses (diseases and infections that are naturally transmitted between vertebrate animals and humans).

### NIEHS focus

The Collaborating Centre at NIEHS will focus on five priorities for research and research translation - children's environmental health, climate change and human health, developmental origins of health and disease, e-waste, and indoor air pollution. "Increased dialogue and understanding is a benefit to being a Collaborating Centre," said Claudia Thompson, Ph.D., a member of the NIEHS Global Environmental Health Program Steering Committee. "The designation also will increase integration across common themes within the Institute."

For example, NIEHS seeks to better understand the link between indoor air pollution and premature deaths, such as through support of intervention studies to investigate realistic alternatives to biomass-burning cookstoves in developing countries. "Having the weight of being a Collaborating Centre, we can see who else has activities in this area around the globe, which should help in coordination and more quickly getting data," Thompson said. "That will help increase dialogue and accelerate findings."

### The collaboration

The Collaborating Centre designation culminates three productive decades of partnership, beginning with a cooperative agreement in the early 1980s, facilitated by William Suk, Ph.D., director of the NIEHS Center for Risk and Integrated Sciences



Whether at breakfast, a roundtable discussion, or the Collaborating Centre launch itself, Neira shared her commitment to preventing adverse environmental impacts on health. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



As head of the Collaborating Centre, Balbus will continue to raise awareness of the importance of improving environmental public health worldwide. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)

and the Superfund Research Program.

As detailed in a [2011 WHO publication](#),

([http://www.who.int/ceh/publications/30years\\_partnership/en/index.html](http://www.who.int/ceh/publications/30years_partnership/en/index.html))

cooperation between the two agencies helped further the International Programme on Chemical Safety and the Environmental Criteria series. With more than 200 peer-reviewed publications, this influential series provides information on a range of environmental health topics to governments.

As a Collaborating Centre, the two organizations will continue to work together to develop training programs, and support and host conferences and workshops related to its five focus areas.

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

## Local global environmental health leaders keep Neira busy in RTP

Neira's schedule included a variety of meetings and events, to provide those with an interest in improving global environmental health the opportunity to meet with her in person.

### **Breakfast**

Neira's day in N.C. began early, with a breakfast presentation at a meeting of the Triangle Global Health Consortium (TGHC).

(<http://triangleglobalhealth.org/home>)

She dispensed with slides and spoke off the cuff about the urgent need to focus on preventive health measures when addressing global health concerns. Neira devoted much of the time to answering TGHC members' questions on topics ranging from economics to the mechanisms of achieving social change.

### **Midmorning**

Next, Neira met with local leaders in global environmental health, including representatives from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Gillings School of Global Public Health, Duke University Nicholas School of the Environment and Global Health Institute, North Carolina State University, the Research Triangle Environmental Health Collaborative, and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

### **NIEHS leadership and lunch**

Prior to the afternoon ceremony, Neira spent time with NIEHS leadership, then lunched with members of the NIEHS Global Environmental Health Working Group to discuss the salient features of the collaboration.

### **Collaborating Centre launch**

NIEHS staff, members of the NIEHS Council (see [story](#)), and the general public welcomed Neira for a full afternoon devoted to the history of and plans for the Collaborating Centre, before she left for her return flight to Geneva.



*NIEHS staff involved with the Collaborating Centre met with staff of WHO and the WHO Pan American Health Organization. Seated, left to right, are Agnes Soares, M.D. (PAHO); Marie-Noel Bruné Drisse, Ph.D. (WHO); Balbus; Birnbaum; Neira; and Luiz Augusto Cassanha Galvao, M.D., (PAHO). Standing, left to right, are Kimberly Gray, Ph.D.; Suk; Kathy Prout (WHO); Claudia Thompson, Ph.D.; Michelle Heacock, Ph.D.; Bono Sen, Ph.D.; Jerry Heindel, Ph.D.; Stephanie London, M.D., Dr.P.H.; and Kimberly Thigpen Tart, J.D. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)*

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