

Duke and UNC SRP scientists connect with journalists

By Megan Avakian

To help the public better understand the real-world applications of their research, the NIEHS-funded Duke University and University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC) Superfund Research Program (SRP) Research Translation Cores (RTC) co-hosted a workshop March 5-6, focused on communicating science to the media. Eighteen journalists from national and local news outlets interacted with RTC scientists to learn about SRP issues and how they are relevant in people's everyday lives.

Meeting face-to-face with Duke and UNC SRP scientists allowed the journalists to connect to the research on a personal level. "The workshop helped to raise the journalists' awareness of the SRP and allowed them to see it as a very relevant area of scientific research," said Kathleen Gray, leader of the UNC RTC.

The workshop was part of a weeklong learning expedition sponsored by the [Institutes for Journalism and Natural Resources \(IJNR\)](http://www.ijnr.org/programs/expeditions.html), (<http://www.ijnr.org/programs/expeditions.html>) which provides fellowships to journalists, to meet with scientists in the field and in laboratories, to learn firsthand about environmental issues. Duke and UNC RTC staff helped plan the agenda, which focused on issues of environmental contamination.

Workshop highlights

Field activities on the first day began with a visit to the [Ward Transformer Superfund site](http://www.epa.gov/region4/superfund/sites/npl/northcarolina/wardtrnc.html),

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where the IJNR fellows learned about the site's history, polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) contamination in soil and fish, and downstream contamination. According to Gray, the journalists were interested in the fish consumption advisories associated with the Ward site and whether they were effective for informing and protecting the public from PCB contamination.

The group then traveled to the Duke campus, where several SRP researchers, including Richard Di Giulio, Ph.D., director of the Duke SRP, and James Swenberg, D.V.M., Ph.D., director of UNC SRP, provided an overview of the research being conducted at each of the centers.

Duke SRP environmental chemist Heather Stapleton, Ph.D., gave the fellows a tour of her lab and explained her research on brominated flame retardants in foam furniture cushions. Stapleton also allowed the journalists to submit foam samples from furniture in their homes and workplaces for analysis.

UNC SRP molecular biologist Rebecca Fry, Ph.D., also spoke to the group about her research on how arsenic and cadmium affect human health.



Drew Cade, Lake Crabtree County Park manager, discussed community impacts downstream of the Ward Transformer Superfund site with visiting journalists. (Photo courtesy of Sarah Yelton of UNC)



Journalists learned about the history of PCB contamination and remediation at the Ward Transformer Superfund site in Raleigh, N.C., from U.S. Environmental Protection Agency staff and contractors. (Photo courtesy of Sarah Yelton of UNC)



Fry shared her research on the health effects of exposure to arsenic with IJNR fellows. (Photo courtesy of Sarah Yelton of UNC)

The day closed with a presentation from Heather Henry, Ph.D., NIEHS SRP health science administrator, about online tools and resources journalists can use to learn more about SRP, environmental chemicals, and exposures.

The next morning, the fellows heard from UNC epidemiologists Steve Wing, Ph.D., and Ginger Guidry, Ph.D., about the range of environmental chemicals people are exposed to in their daily lives.

Representatives from the local environmental advocacy groups ToxicFree NC and Neuse Riverkeeper Foundation also spoke about the role of policy to protect human health and the environment.

Raising awareness and building connections

The workshop increased the journalists' general awareness of SRP-funded research and Superfund contaminants, connecting some participants to the issues for the first time and giving others new story angles. Several of the journalists signed up to receive the centers' newsletters, to stay current with Duke and UNC SRP research and activities.

Another valuable outcome of the workshop was the bidirectional communication network that was established between the journalists and scientists. "Now our centers have connections to environmental reporters who can translate and share our research with wider audiences," said Charlotte Clark, Ph.D., leader of the Duke RTC.

"The journalists stressed how important it is to have access to scientists who can verify information from multiple, and sometimes conflicting, online sources," Henry added.

(Megan Avakian is a research and communication specialist for MDB Inc., a contractor for the NIEHS Superfund Research Program and Division of Extramural Research and Training.)



Swenberg provided journalists with an overview of the mission and research projects of the UNC SRP. (Photo courtesy of Sarah Yelton of UNC)

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