

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

Dr. Linda Birnbaum, NIEHS (Part 1)

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 are celebrating a milestone. After decades of research and collaboration on a global scale, NIEHS is taking on a more formal role on the global public health stage. The institute has been designated as a World Health Organization Collaborating Center for Environmental Health Sciences.

This podcast is the first in a 3-part series in which we hear from leaders at NIEHS and WHO about their vision for a fruitful collaboration.

Our first guest is Dr. Linda Birnbaum. She's director of the NIEHS and the National Toxicology Program. She says she's excited about this NIEHS milestone because environmental health is a global problem, and it's one that needs global solutions.

Linda Birnbaum: The world is extremely small. We live in one world and pollution doesn't stay local, it goes global. In many cases, I think we are trying to deal with the environmental health issues in our country; it has a lot of impacts for people around the world as well as their environmental health issues come back and impact us. It's a small world

Johnson: She says the new partnership comes at a time when scientists are finding more and more evidence of the critical role the environment plays in shaping people's health.

Birnbaum: The understanding that has been achieved within the last year or so, is that it's chronic noncommunicable diseases, which are the greatest cause of morbidity and mortality around the world today. We are very interested in these chronic noncommunicable diseases and how the environment has a role in these conditions. One of the area that we are really focusing on is the early life exposure, sometimes known as the Developmental Origins of Health and Disease, the fact that what happens to you before you are born or early in life may in fact set your trajectory for your health for the rest of your life.

Johnson: Getting started on the right trajectory can be especially hard for people living in areas with chronically unhealthy environments, such as places with high levels of indoor air pollution.

Birnbaum: Children's environmental health is obviously a major issue for us. For example, the indoor cookstoves or indoor air is a huge issue especially in parts of the developing world where women spend much of their time cooking over a smoky, non-ventilated stove and we know that the long term impacts of this on their health can be very severe, but we also understand that the health of their children is severely impacted. And the number of people who die every year from indoor cookstoves, the

estimates doubled from 2 million to 4 million a year and the overwhelming majority of these are children.

Johnson: Children's health and air pollution are just two of the many global environmental health challenges the new collaborating center will focus on. Other key areas include climate change and its health impacts, as well as the global problem of e-waste. E-waste, or electronic waste, is a growing threat as people dispose of electronic devices unsafely or try to recycle them using methods that release harmful contaminants into the environment. Dr. Birnbaum said NIEHS is well positioned to lead the research agenda and facilitate important interactions that can help move these issues forward.

Birnbaum: Dr. John Balbus, who is a public health physician, is our key person related to our whole global environmental health efforts. We have many other key players, who will be working with John. We have also established a steering committee related to the issues of global environmental health and much of our efforts under global will go through our partnerships with WHO. I think the Collaborating Center designation helps facilitate not only holding of workshops and developing of reports, but actually getting the key people together to advance research agendas.

Johnson: The Institute's relationship with WHO has already brought people together around issues such as electronic waste, endocrine disruptors, and climate change. Visit our website to learn more about these recent activities.

Thanks to Dr. Linda Birnbaum for sharing her vision as celebrate the new NIEHS-WHO Collaborating Center. In the next podcasts in this series, we'll hear from World Health Organization leaders about what they hope the collaboration can accomplish. Find those podcasts on our website at niehs.nih.gov/podcasts.

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