

Podcast transcript: NIEHS Program Empowers Women, Improves Health

[Theme music]

Ashley Ahearn (AA): You're listening to Environmental Health Chat – a show from the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences that explores the connections between our health and our world.

I'm Ashley Ahearn.

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There's an old saying - "Women hold up half the sky" – well, when it comes to public health that is MORE than true. In fact, focusing on women's health is central to improving the overall health of a community, if you ask Dr. Joan Packenham. She directs the Office of Human Research and Community Engagement at NIEHS

Joan Packenham (JP): Women are the caregivers of the home. And they are so busy taking care of everyone else – their children, their husbands, parents, siblings – they forget to take care of themselves. And although they live longer than men, they are more likely to acquire more chronic illness and have more debilitating illnesses than men.

AA: Women's roles are, of course, changing but Dr. Packenham has devoted her career to finding ways to support women because they are so often the ones supporting and protecting others in their communities. Her work at NIEHS focuses health disparities and environmental exposures that can affect public health. Helping women achieve healthy lives translates into better health for those far beyond their own families, Dr. Packenham says.

JP: Women are always seeking information to help their homes. They have a hunger and a thirst for understanding health information and what kinds of exposures will adversely impact their families. This is one of the reasons why we focus in on women, because they're going to make sure that everyone in their household is taken care of, they're going to go seek the information, obtain it, and then try to implement the good information in their families.

AA: In 2015, Dr. Packenham created the Women's Health Awareness Program to bring together researchers, public health practitioners, health care providers, and community members to address environmental health disparities.

JP: We concentrate on all women, but we are really looking at the U3 population of women, and that would be underrepresented, understudied, and underreported populations of women.

AA: U3 populations of women include Black or African American, Hispanic or Latina, American Indian or Alaska Native, and Asian Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islanders. The term also refers to socioeconomically disadvantaged, underserved, rural, or sexual and gender minorities.

A growing body of research shows major disparities in diagnosis, research, and health outcomes between U3 populations and white Americans.

And there are some key statistics I want to share that zero in on disparities between Black and white women, specifically, in the U.S.:

Death rates from uterine cancer are 98 percent higher for Black women than white women. Death rates for breast cancer are 41 percent higher for Black women than white women.

Black women are three times more likely to die during pregnancy and birth than white women – according to data from 2011-2015. They are also more likely to get lupus and other autoimmune diseases and more likely to die of heart disease.

But despite these inequities in health outcomes, public health research has not centered or prioritized women of color. For example, from 2003-2016, less than 6 percent of participants in clinical cancer trials were Black and only 2.6 percent were Hispanic.

Dr. Packenham wants to change that.

JP: That's where the research comes in. We're trying to understand the why.

AA: So, 8 years ago, she developed a conference. But this isn't any conference...

JP: The Women's Health Awareness conference is a women's wellness conference.

AA: Meaning, it's more than a gathering of experts to share scientific research and attend panel discussions. It's an opportunity for Dr. Pakenham's research group to understand the health and environmental concerns of women across many communities and connect women in those communities with the latest findings that relate to their health and the health of their families.

JP: So, we have environmental health education sessions, cardiovascular sessions, diabetes, reproductive health, cancer. We have what we call healthy living sessions about exercise or mindfulness activities. Sessions on behavioral health. Cooking sessions.

AA: Hundreds of women attend each year – more than 3,500 women have participated since the conference began in 2015. They've come from 30 counties across North Carolina. And with the COVID-19 pandemic, Dr. Packenham and her team have been able to serve even more women outside of the state by taking the conference virtual.

JP: It was an incredible amount of work. Because the way that we set up the platform, there were at least five sessions going on at any one time. Women had the opportunity to come in and out of the sessions and select the sessions that they wanted to participate in. So we ended up having a conference that had 23 different sessions and had a keynote session as well. And then we had a series of health tip videos. We also had exhibitors and we had a clinical corner to talk about clinical studies at NIEHS. So, we tried to incorporate the entire conference that we would do in person within a virtual format.

AA: This year they also set up two satellite conference locations where women in more rural parts of North Carolina without access to good wi-fi could gather to participate in the virtual conference and meet one another while following COVID safety protocols.

JP: We listen to the community, we listen to their voices, we ask them: What are their needs? What are they going through? We're not scientists just coming in and telling them what we think they need. We started this initiative going to the community first to find out what their needs were.

AA: The conference has traditionally been held at North Carolina Central University, a Historically Black College and University, in partnership with the Durham Alumni chapter of the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Incorporated.

JP: One thing that I have really enjoyed is having the connection with the students because we are training the next generation to create a diverse and multicultural workforce for researchers and clinical practitioners. And so, we give students experiential learning opportunities in how to work with the community. We also utilize Women's Health Awareness, the conference itself, as the opportunity for the students to come in and to work with the community and learn how to work with the community. We're educating that next generation in how to be better stewards for helping the community.

AA: The Women's Health Awareness Conference also provides tips and one-on-one informational sessions to help prevent and manage health challenges, like diabetes and heart disease, that disproportionately affect women of color.

Women who attend the conference can also get free health screenings and medical advice from health care providers.

Dr. Packenham remembers one woman in particular who benefited from that opportunity when she came to the conference.

JP: She had been having some issues that she thought were bronchitis and so she would go to urgent care and they would give her, you know, antibiotics.

AA: But the woman wasn't getting better. At the Women's Health Awareness Conference, she was able to get a pulmonary screening.

JP: And she could not get enough oxygen to successfully complete the screening. And so they told her that she needed to stop going to urgent care and that she needed to find a pulmonologist. And they gave her a referral.

AA: That's another important part of the conference, Dr. Packenham says – helping women navigate the medical system. It's not enough to just educate women, or diagnose them, they often need help getting the proper care.

JP: This particular young lady, she was navigated to a pulmonologist. Well come to find out, she had stage four lung cancer. And of course, she didn't survive. But the thing was, her daughter said to me: 'If my mom had not come to Women's Health Awareness, she would have just dropped dead. And we would have not known what was wrong with her.'

Because she kept going, right? Women, we try to be super women. She would go to urgent care, get some medicine, and she just kept going.

She [the daughter] said: 'Because she came to Women's Health Awareness, she found out that she was having a serious pulmonary issue and my brother and I got to spend more time with our mom, which was very important for our family.'

AA: The conference has also helped many women get diagnosed and treated earlier in their illnesses.

JP: We have had women who have come in and they have had thyroid screenings and they have found nodules. And I know one lady who told me that her nodule was cancerous. And that doctor told her it was small, but it was cancerous. And that by the time it would have started bothering her it may have metastasized. So she was thankful for being able to come and get access to the kind of screenings that save lives.

AA: Throughout her career, Dr. Pakenham has focused on elevating women and helping women support one another – through more inclusive health research and direct services. She knows that women are the key to making change and combating environmental injustice in their communities. The Women’s Health Awareness Conference is just one part of that broader mission, but it’s one that Dr. Pakenham is proud to continue.

JP: We were trying to help women to be their own advocates as it relates to their health and their environment. To get the things that they need for their families and their homes, to have a better and healthier lifestyle.

That’s the goal, to live a better, healthier life in a cleaner environment.

[Music comes up]

I’m Ashley Ahearn. Thanks for listening to Environmental Health Chat.