

William Suk, NIEHS

[music] 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.

Children are our future [sound of children playing]. They love exploring their world [child laughing] and it's amazing to see how quickly they absorb new knowledge [children reciting lessons]. Unfortunately, they also are quick to absorb environmental contaminants. The health effects of these exposures are amplified in children's bodies. And when children become ill, it's not only the children who suffer, but all of us. Today's children are tomorrow's workers, inventors, artists, and leaders. Protecting children's health is an investment in the future of every community and country around the globe.

In one of our previous podcast series, we explored NIEHS's role as a World Health Organization Collaborating Centre. Today, we're drilling deeper into that relationship. We'll take a look at what NIEHS and other organizations are doing as part of the Children's Environmental Health Collaborating Centres Network.

Our first guest is Dr. Bill Suk. He's chief of the hazardous substances research branch and director of the Superfund Research Program at NIEHS. He said the Children's Environmental Health Collaborating Centres Network represents a new chapter in a long history of partnership.

William Suk: Everybody that's a part of this collaborating centers network right now—we've been working together for a long time. I think now we have, shall we say, more of a deliberate focus. Here at NIEHS we have a substantial portfolio of grants and activities on children's environmental health, and we're going to essentially do a fair amount of leveraging between parts of NIEHS's programs, linking people with other programs at NIH and linking with these organizations globally in order to make sure that the research that's being performed either in the United States or elsewhere in the world is translated in a way that can benefit these kids.

Anne Johnson: The network's main activities are to link researchers together, disseminate new research findings, and to help translate those findings to reach a broader community. Because it's a truly global network, the network is able to disseminate information across regions in a way that would be much harder for institutions to do on their own.

William Suk: What is the commonality? What can we link from one region to another region to ensure that the message and the wording and the research findings that are being translated from one region to another are being done in a way that is consistent. It's important to be able to take information and be able to use it in a way that is an effective way but also a culturally appropriate way.

Anne Johnson: One example is the problem of electronic waste, or e-waste. In some developing countries, children are being put to work dismantling old electronics. In the process, they're being exposed to highly toxic materials.

William Suk: There's a fair amount of science that has already gone into the individual components of e-waste. So we already know what's toxic. But in different parts of the world it's important to be able to take this information and put it in a way that people can understand it—not only parents, but also physicians and nurses and other healthcare providers.

Anne Johnson: In addition to translating research that's already out there, the network provides a platform for advancing new research directions.

William Suk: We are looking more and more at not just early life exposures, but the exposures that the mom has while she is pregnant and the effect that that might have not just on her health but also on the health of the newborn and then the developing child. It's more than just birth to three years old or birth to six years old. Now the discussion is prenatal to adolescents and adults.

Anne Johnson: Bill said these new research directions and a renewed focus on children's health globally mean the time is right for this new chapter in the WHO Children's Environmental Health Collaborating Centres Network.

William Suk: We're trying to just make sure that everybody is aware of this network and the fact that it is open to anybody who's willing to participate. This network is just beginning, and in an ideal world in a few years, hopefully we'll be able to have more than just eight or 10 centers networking and working together, but maybe 50, or 100.

Anne Johnson: In the second podcast in our series, we'll hear from Dr. Amalia Laborde, who coordinates with the network from her institution in Uruguay. You can find that podcast and more information at our website, niehs.nih.gov/geh. You've been listening to Global Environmental Health Chat, brought to you by the Global Environmental Health program of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences. [music]