

Collaborative on Health and the Environment (CHE)

University of Washington, Seattle, WA

March 26, 2003

Meeting Notes – General Discussion Period

4:15 p.m. Michael Lerner, president of Commonweal, and Elise Miller, executive director of the Institute for Children's Environmental Health, acted as facilitators for the meeting's final discussion period. They introduced the period as a chance for the group to underscore both a) current and emerging initiatives on environmental health in the Northwest, as well as any other collaborative opportunities, and b) how CHE might serve as both a bridge-building mechanism and informational resource to support these efforts. Michael and Elise not only welcomed voluntary comments from those in the group who wished to speak, they also called upon specific individuals in an effort to bring out the voices of many of the distinct sectors of the activist community represented at the meeting. These sectors included government, foundations, research, education, environmental justice, women's and human rights, and grassroots organizing.

Karen McDonell, board member of the Washington Toxics Coalition, initiated the commentary period by expressing frustration concerning the difficulty of creating change in health policy. Too often, Karen suggested, decisions seem to be guided by moneyed interests, such as those of tobacco and insurance corporations.

Tom Burbacher, University of Washington research associate professor, commented upon the obstacles to uniting scientists with community leaders, largely due to scientists' common reluctance to bridge the gap between a) measuring toxic body burdens and b) interpreting for the public what these numbers mean. Tom asserted the importance of finding a way for scientists to work with community leaders to address this latter piece of the work, convincing the public that, whether or not hazardous chemicals can actually be definitively proven to be the culprits of certain harms, they do not need to be in our bodies and breast milk.

*Richard Fenske, University of Washington professor of environmental health, noted the value of scientific research, such as pesticide exposure assessment, for the promotion of the larger movement. He noted a recent article in the *New York Times' Science Times* that cited a very simple and convincing study evaluating differences in health effects among two groups of children in which group A was raised on diets primarily composed of organic foods and group B was raised on foods grown with pesticides. Richard noted that, at the national level, the difference between organic and inorganic foods has been formally and legally recognized. Consumers now have the option to choose between organic, wholesome foods, and their less wholesome counterparts.*

Michael McCally, Oregon Health and Sciences University professor of public health and preventive medicine, brought up the crucial need to educate our medical professionals. He argued that medical school curricula need to be revolutionized so that patients can have doctors with the knowledge and concern to become advocates and community educators for the environmental health concerns their communities face.

John Peterson (Pete) Myers, senior advisor to the United Nations Foundation, asserted that we must avoid the kind of argument that tries to make "proof certain" our claims linking chronic disease and toxics, as we can become "locked into these arguments forever." Pete declared this a basically "bad argument." Rather, we must rest upon the fact that there are

plausible links between the rise in environmental toxicants and chronic disease, justifying intense precaution and giving us more than sufficient reason to alter our actions. The unavoidable reality, according to Pete, is that ninety-nine percent of the things we say with regard to specific toxins creating specific disorders will never be known “for certain,” due to the many other variables that also influence human health.

Clark Williams-Derry, research director for Northwest Environment Watch (NEW), explained that NEW has been preparing a breast milk study in which they will track traces of PBDEs using a protocol developed in California. NEW is currently looking for mothers who would be interested in participating in the study, as well as for people who can help NEW talk to the mothers about the issues they will face when they learn about the toxic loads common in breast milk and then examine the results of their own toxic levels.

Aimee Boulanger, executive director of Women’s Voices for the Earth, suggested that we turn to Sharyle Patton for commentary on the issue of breast milk testing, as Sharyle has received national and international acclaim for her work around breast milk biomonitoring.

Sharyle Patton, of Commonweal, drew the group’s attention to a major problem with testing breast milk: fear of finding contaminants in breast milk may keep women from breastfeeding. In other words, the headlines that result from the studies’ publicity can frighten women away from breastfeeding, which is still the most healthy method of feeding an infant for many reasons. Sharyle suggested that the groups who test breast milk must address the depth of the experience for both women and their babies, as it is, in Sharyle’s words, “a time of falling in love and of bonding, a precious moment.” Sharyle cautioned the group against posing the issue as, “Are my breasts toxic waste sites?” Rather, the question should really be, “What should I be feeding my baby?” If nature’s most perfect food is contaminated, then isn’t this a potent call to action?

Michael Lerner reported that when CHE was initiated, many of those involved wanted to develop a breast milk biomonitoring work group. They wanted to make CHE a “state of the art” authority on breast milk body burdens. Michael reiterated that CHE is not a body destined to become an “authority” in its own right; rather, it is meant to be a quiet network that creates links between groups who then go out and do the work in their own names.

Tanya Kim, youth program manager for the International District Housing Alliance, cautioned the group to be aware of the international community’s perspectives when we craft studies and do work that affects them. If we want to have a positive impact on communities, we must address their disinterest or feelings of vulnerability and shame. Tanya related the importance of asking the questions, “How can we make our work an interchange, instead of an imposition upon communities? How can we engage the communities in every step of this process?”

Sharyle Patton spoke up to echo Tanya’s caution, and informed the group of her current involvement in creating a “how-to” brochure on conducting community biomonitoring studies. A key element Sharyle has discovered is the importance of working *with* the communities to decide what they want to test and why. She cautioned the group to be aware that whoever crafts the study’s components and decides what the study evaluates effectively “owns” the study and its resultant data; our work must be rooted in community, or our data will be ineffectual in creating change in the communities we hope to influence.

Tanya Kim echoed Sharyle’s sentiments, and added that the follow-up work subsequent to the studies ought to be looked at with the same measure of importance as the data itself; it is the follow-up work in communities that extends the impacts of our studies into the long-term.

Maxine Hayes, state health officer with the Washington State Department of Health, suggested that the current need is not for continued studies, as we already have a great deal of scientific data arguing for our concerns. The important question now is how to use the data. As a specific site for collaborative opportunity, Maxine pointed to the West Nile Virus, a public health issue that we will eventually have to address in the Pacific Northwest. Maxine advised the group that we must be united in our understanding of the illness and of how to deal with it. Moreover, we must educate the public to take safe preventive actions while avoiding panic.

Michael Lerner then called on Dave Anderson to give his impression of current opportunities for creating change in the Pacific Northwest.

Dave Anderson, former Washington State representative, called opportunities “tremendous,” and shared his sentiment that the community of activists represented at the meeting was “the kind of group that gives one hope,” in stark contrast to the hopelessness he often felt while in congress. As a specific site of opportunity, Dave mentioned the relatively well-publicized studies on the effects of PCBs on Orca populations as a potentially key model for educating the public about how PCBs could be impacting human populations.

Michael Lerner then called on Linda Park to give her impressions of any new opportunities for philanthropy groups to become more deeply involved in this work.

Linda Park, president of Seattle Biotech Legacy Foundation (SBLF), began by explaining her foundation’s roots. When Immunex, a local biotech company, was taken over by Amgen, a Californian biotech company, the community of scientists, business people, and doctors who had worked together at Immunex wanted to keep their community together while uniting their interdisciplinary expertise in a new, local effort. SBLF resulted. As they were fostering a mission for the foundation, they considered the question, “What crucial health concern really speaks to people?” They decided upon the connection between human health and environmental health. Linda explained that SBLF was born out of a desire to bring both scientific expertise and financial aid to the environmental health field; as they surveyed the field, they saw relatively few scientists working to engage public and government support for environmental health concerns. As a specific site for collaboration, Linda named an interdisciplinary seminar series that her foundation has been putting together. The series would be not only for the scientific community, but for the general public.

Michael Lerner then called on Roger Rosenblatt to give his clinician’s perspective on areas for potential collaboration.

Roger Rosenblatt, professor and vice chair of the University of Washington School of Medicine’s Department of Family Medicine, suggested metaphorically that it is no accident that a meeting that seeks to foster new growth in the environmental health field should take place in the spring, as we watch leaves unfurl and flowers begin to blossom. He encouraged the group to take solace in remembering that the meeting’s participants only comprised a narrow fraction of those working on environmental health. He suggested, however, that part of the difficulty in educating people about these concerns lies in our being more frail as a species than we believe ourselves to be. Most of human history, Roger related, has told the story of humans affecting the environment to our overall benefit. However, with the impacts of synthetic chemicals we have reached a “watershed point” where the trends are clearly going the other way as well. Roger ended his comments by suggesting that the potential for increased involvement of the clinical sector is immense, and of pivotal importance; doctors should be educating families as much about pesticide safety as about nutrition and exercise.

As a culture, we must come to recognize toxins as the dangerous weapons that they are – we must be educating our children equally about toxin safety as about weapon and drug safety. *Elise Miller* echoed Roger's interest in heightening the role of clinicians and suggested *In Harm's Way* trainings to be an avenue by which we may educate clinicians and lay people alike. Elise informed the group that on November 8, 2003, the Institute for Children's Environmental Health will be partnering with the Physicians for Social Responsibility in Washington State to bring the *In Harm's Way* training seminar to Seattle. She noted that a similar training will be held in Portland, Oregon, on November 6, 2003.

Luis (Tito) Rodriguez, public health advisor in the Pesticide and Surveillance Section of the Washington State Department of Health, commented upon the importance of continuing scientific research for risk assessment and regulatory work and for answering the questions of affected communities. Without continuing research, Tito held, regulatory bodies like the DOH do not have the needed tools to progress in their work.

Michael Davis, planning and development specialist in the Community Services Division of Seattle Public Utilities, counterbalanced Tito's appeal for continued research by returning to the reality of how much eminently useful research has already been done, the data of which we are already prepared to teach to affected communities. Michael asserted that we must not wait to engage communities until we have "more information;" we must involve them in that discussion now.

John Ridgeway, environmental justice coordinator for the Washington State Department of Ecology, suggested the new "sustainability process" requirements for each Washington State department to be an area of opportunity for us all to "prod and focus" these government officials. John reported that the processes that most departments have developed tend to focus on economy and business, without any regard paid to social justice, which John called "a crucial component of the work; we must get businesses to become socially responsible."

Elise Miller began to conclude the meeting by reminding the group to reflect upon the day's experience and to consider joining CHE and becoming part of the network of scientists and advocates working to strengthen our communal and individual efforts by collaboration. Elise reminded the group to look over the sheet inside of the meeting packets detailing the many avenues for engaging with CHE.

Laurie Valeriano asked for a show of hands for those who would like to continue to arrange face-to-face meetings for those of us hoping to heighten our collaborative work in the Pacific Northwest. (A clear majority assented.)

Michael Lerner brought the meeting to a close with a few words of hope and healing. He appealed to us that, when we feel overwhelmed by the problems we face and by the seeming impossibility of the greater task, we must look back to how impossible the democracy movement must have looked in an age of kings. We must imagine how the antislavery movement may have seemed when slave-owners ran our country, how the women's rights movement must have appeared when women were considered property, how the gay rights movement could have looked when hate crimes and discrimination were ignored. Michael predicted that the right of women to breastfeed free of toxics is going to become one of the great human rights movements of our age. (Women will lead this movement, he noted, for women "get" these issues; they feel them viscerally.) When even small groups of people unite to create a difference in matters that deeply concern them, the results can be extraordinary.

5:15 p.m. Adjourn