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ESTABLISHING THE INTERNATIONAL NETWORK ON CHILDREN'S HEALTH, ENVIRONMENT AND SAFETY

Report on a WHO Working Group

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EUROPEAN HEALTH21 TARGET 10

A HEALTHY AND SAFE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

By the year 2015, people in the Region should live in a safer physical environment, with exposure to contaminants hazardous to health at levels not exceeding internationally agreed standards

(Adopted by the WHO Regional Committee for Europe at its forty-eighth session, Copenhagen, September 1998)

ABSTRACT

Civil society organizations, professional associations, advocacy leaders, government officials and intergovernmental organizations increasingly recognize that preventing the effects of environmental degradation on human health, particularly that of children, is the foundation of sound environmental policy and decision-making. With this in mind, an initiative was started to develop an international network that will: facilitate access to scientific findings, prevention measures and public health initiatives; promote the exchange of information among people working in the field of children, environment and health; and improve the basis for citizens' participation in the development of environmental health policies to protect children.

Keywords

CHILD WELFARE
ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH
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INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

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Introduction

A number of health problems associated with environmental hazards have become increasingly prevalent in children. Of these, the increase in childhood asthma rates, environmental tobacco smoke, the apparent increase in childhood cancers, reproductive disorders and birth defects, as well as mortality and morbidity due to injuries, deserve special attention. In addition, children of low socioeconomic status may be at greater risk as a consequence of their living in heavily polluted environments, poor quality of housing and restricted access to clean air, safe drinking-water and adequate food.

Several international agreements have committed their signatories to protecting children's health from the effects of a deteriorating environment: the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989); the World Summit for Children (1990); Agenda 21 (1992) and the 1997 Declaration of the Environmental Leaders of the Eight on Children's Environmental Health.

There is growing recognition by civil society organizations, professional associations, advocacy leaders, government officials and intergovernmental organizations that children's health and environment form a critical issue in the development of healthy, sustainable and just communities. Preventing the effects of environmental degradation on human health, particularly that of children, is the foundation of sound environmental policy and decision-making.

With this in mind, an initiative was started to develop an international network that will facilitate access to scientific findings, prevention measures and public health initiatives; promote the exchange of information among people working in the field of children, environment and health; and improve the basis for citizen participation in the development of environmental health policies to protect children.

Getting started

A meeting was held in Copenhagen in March 1998, sponsored by the European Environment Agency (EEA), Childwatch International, Danish Children's Council, Danish Ecological Council and WHO, to ascertain interest in and support for the establishment of an international information network on environment and children's health. A follow-up workshop, organized by Childwatch International and the Dutch Association of Environmental Medicine within the margins of the 1st International Conference on Children's Health and Environment, was held in August 1998 in Amsterdam. This workshop established a Coordination Committee and an Editorial Group (see Annex 1 for composition); it also brought together organizations, institutions and other bodies willing to support the network. The title of the network was also agreed: International Network of Children's Health, Environment and Safety (INCHES).

The Editorial Group subsequently prepared a position paper on INCHES¹, which served as the background paper for this meeting.

Scope and purpose of meeting

The meeting in Rome, organized in collaboration with Childwatch International, the Dutch Association of Environmental Medicine and the EEA, and with the support of the US Environmental Protection Agency, was convened to further develop the structure, functions

¹ Position paper on INCHES – International Network on Children's Health, Environment and Safety, January 1999. Available from Mary Louise Bistrup or Peter van den Hazel (see Annex 2, Participants).

and activities of INCHEs. While INCHEs is intended to be a global initiative, it was recognized that the specific activities decided upon at this meeting might be more suited to the European Region.

It was attended by 15 participants from 11 countries in Europe, North America and South America and 2 participants from international organizations (Annex 2).

Joy Carlson and Dawn Walker shared the chair. Elaine Price served as Rapporteur.

On 15 March 1999, the Coordination Committee met to discuss issues related to the structure and organization of INCHEs. A summary of its discussion is given in Annex 3.

Learning from others

The experiences of two national networks devoted to children's environmental health were drawn upon: the Children's Environmental Health Network in the United States and the Canadian Children's Environmental Health Network.

The American experience

Since its inception 10 years ago as a local project to develop training materials for doctors and nurses in paediatric environmental medicine, the Children's Environmental Health Network (CEHN) has developed into a nationwide initiative devoted to protecting the health of children as it relates to environmental hazards. Its goals are to promote the development of sound public health and child-focused national policy; stimulate prevention-oriented research; educate health professionals, policy-makers and community members in preventive strategies; and increase public awareness of environmental hazards to children. Its wide range of activities include organizing national conferences for health professionals, developing training materials for medical and nursing professionals; producing various publications that range from resource guides to conference proceedings; operating a Web site; briefing politicians on critical issues; advocating for child protective public health policies; and alerting researchers to priority research concerns.

The Board of Directors, comprised of individuals on their own merit, sets the course and direction of CEHN. There are three committees – education, policy and research – which carry out this direction in their respective areas: they are comprised of both individuals on their own merit and representatives of organizations. The host body is the Public Health Institute through which funds are channelled and which provides some administrative support.

The Canadian experience

The concept of the Canadian network started about five years ago with the Canadian Institute of Child Health (CICH) receiving funding to complete a national needs assessment to determine the level of interest in environmental health issues. In May 1996, CICH held the Canadian national conference "What on Earth", which brought together many of the relevant research, advocacy and health organizations and resulted in the publication of six referenced papers used across the country by multidisciplinary groups. In 1998, CICH received limited funding to hold regional meetings to further the development of the Canadian Children's Environmental Health Network. An independent needs assessment specific to forming the network identified CICH as the host organization. Extensive discussion focused on the governance model and organizational relationships. The Canadian network has been working through a list server, conference calls and meetings and will soon expand with more Internet activities. The network is currently supported

by funds solicited by CICH and CICH's own funding. The network is directed by an Advisory Committee comprised of six members who serve in their own right or as representatives of organizations.

Lessons learned

Although initiated in different ways – CEHN, which began with a specific activity aimed at a specific audience, and the Canadian Institute network, which began with a national activity with a broad agenda – these two networks illustrate several common key points: a clear mission and goals; defined short-term activities that yield results that can attract further funding and support; and a host organization.

Steps forward

The consensus of opinion was that the position paper on INCHEs clearly spells out the mission and goals of the network and provides an adequate overall framework in which work could be taken forward during the next several years. A number of organizations have indicated their support of the position paper, and efforts should be made to encourage other relevant bodies to also do so. Some organizations, such as United Nations agencies, may not be able to officially endorse the position paper for legal reasons, but statements of their support would be possible.

With national and international interest in INCHEs growing, the time was right for developing a short-term workplan (two years). The goals of this workplan would be to:

- strengthen the interdisciplinary and international nature of children's health, environment and safety by sharing data and linking with colleagues worldwide;
- secure funding and other support for several projects that should serve to establish the usefulness of the network;
- officially launch the European chapter of INCHEs in June 1999;
- identify a host organization that can nurture the initial development of INCHEs and serve as its administrative body.

With these goals in mind, the working group defined several specific activities that could be carried out by the end of 2000:

- establishment of a Web site;
- adaptation of the CEHN training materials;
- organize a satellite event at the Healthy Planet Forum in London in June 1999 to launch the European chapter of INCHEs;
- organize an event at the XVI World Congress of Asthma in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in October 1999 to launch the Pan-American chapter of INCHEs.

Web site

Two organizations have already initiated Web site activities: the Documentation and Information Center on Environmental Matters (DISU) in Osnabrück, Germany, and Childwatch International in Oslo, Norway.

DISU has set up a trial INCHEs Web site as part of its Environmental Medicine Information Forum (UMINFO). Established by the German Academy of Pediatrics, DISU furthers

interdisciplinary and international cooperation by providing discussion fora for experts, open fora on topics of public concern, and exchange of information especially aimed at providing good models for local action. Matthias Otto expressed the interest of DISU in expanding its electronic role in INCHEs.

Childwatch International has also started a trial INCHEs Web site covering the public information aspects.

The Working Group decided that the Web site should be formally established around the following priorities:

- links to sources of advice, expertise and information on children's health and environment;
- pool of best practices on preventive measures such as reduction of hazardous exposures to allergens;
- pool of data on children's chemical exposure/dose data, perhaps focused initially on food pathways;
- collection of training and education materials for nurses and doctors;
- public information and awareness-raising.

Matthias Otto kindly agreed to serve as project manager of the Web site project, working on the details, funding possibilities and logistics in cooperation with Marie Louise Bistrup, Stephan Boese O'Reilly and David Gee, and with the advice of Joy Carlson and Dawn Walker. In addition, Lis Keiding indicated that the Danish Institute for Clinical Epidemiology may be particularly interested in the issue on best practices on preventive measures.

It was suggested and accepted that in this initial phase of development of the European chapter of INCHEs, Childwatch International, the Danish Institute for Clinical Epidemiology and the German Academy of Pediatrics would form a tripartite group of host organizations. The representatives of these organizations were invited to attend the Coordination Committee meeting the next day.

Training materials

Members of the Working Group felt that the revised training materials on environmental paediatrics developed by CEHN for doctors and nurses in the United States should be evaluated for possible adaptation in selected countries. These materials will be available in late May 1999. Participants from Argentina, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Poland and the United Kingdom expressed interest in such a pilot project.

Training materials available in Austria and Germany should also be evaluated. To facilitate this, the UMINFO network could offer a forum for discussion on them.

Peter van den Hazel kindly agreed to serve as project manager of a pilot project to adapt selected training materials for medical personnel. He will be assisted by Janusz Haluszka, Lis Keiding, Stefania Borgo, Stephan Boese O'Reilly and Lilian Corra, with the advice of Joy Carlson and Dawn Walker.

Satellite event

In parallel with the Third Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health, to be held in London on 16–18 June 1999, a large meeting of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) – called the Healthy Planet Forum – will take place immediately next door. It is organized by the United Nations Environment & Development – UK Committee, the designated focal point for NGO input to and participation in the Ministerial Conference. The EEA, Childwatch International, WHO and the Institute for Environment and Health of the University of Leicester are organizing a 3-hour satellite event on children's health and environment at the Healthy Planet Forum on 16 June 1999.

It was proposed and accepted by the Working Group to launch the European chapter of INCHEs at this satellite event. David Gee will take the lead in organizing the satellite event in cooperation with Mary Louise Bistrup, Peter van den Hazel and Elaine Price.

Pan-American chapter of INCHEs

It is envisaged that this chapter of INCHEs will be launched at an event held on 18 October 1999 during the XVI World Congress of Asthma in Buenos Aires, Argentina. The event will be hosted by the International Society of Doctors for the Environment and INTERASMA; the Direction of Environmental Issues of the Foreign Office of Argentina was showed interest in officially participating in this initiative. Lilian Corra is focal point for this event.

Annex 1

COORDINATION COMMITTEE AND EDITORIAL GROUP

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Marie Louise Bistrup (Childwatch International)
Joy Carlson (Children's Environmental Health Network)
Maria Cherkasova (Center for Independent Ecological Programs)
Lilian Corra (International Society of Doctors for the Environment)
David Gee (European Environment Agency)
Jenny Pronzcuk (International Programme on Chemical Safety)
Martha Shimkin (US Environmental Protection Agency)
Peter van den Hazel (Dutch Association of Environmental Medicine)
Dawn Walker (Canadian Institute of Child Health)

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Annex 3

SUMMARY OF INCHEs COORDINATION COMMITTEE MEETING 15 MARCH 1999

Participants were members of the Coordination Committee (see Annex 1), representatives of the initial host organizations and representatives of UNEP and WHO.

The Coordination Committee

1. Membership is extended to include representatives of the three organizations expected to host the European chapter of INCHEs in 1999/2000: i.e. Childwatch International, the Danish Institute for Clinical Epidemiology and the German Academy of Pediatrics (represented by Stephan Boese O'Reilly).
2. The Committee will continue as an interim body at least until the autumn of 2000, when an international conference on children's health and environment is expected to take place in the United States. The composition of the Committee will be revisited at that time, taking into regard developments.
3. The role of the Committee during the interim period would be to:
 - extend INCHEs into other regions
 - develop mid-term projects
 - monitor ongoing projects
 - set up a secretariat
 - Define types of "membership" in INCHEs (e.g. founding partners, partners, supporters, funders).

Communication/awareness-raising

1. It was decided that INCHEs, at least at this point, would not make policy/advocacy statements, but would instead pose critical questions to organizations or decision-makers.
2. A flyer on INCHEs will be prepared by Marie Louise Bistrup and Peter van den Hazel for the launch in June. It would include the names of members of the network and of the Coordination Committee, and information on the Web site and activities.
3. Marie Louise Bistrup will prepare a proposal for a communication strategy.
4. Peter van den Hazel will prepare an outline of a background document that includes information about the network and its short-term activities, and future perspectives.
5. The current logo (child with balloon) was officially adopted as the INCHEs logo.
6. A statement by INCHEs for the Ministerial Conference will be prepared by Marie Louise Bistrup and Peter van den Hazel.

Fund-raising

1. The funding proposal that was developed last year will be distributed for comments and amendments.
2. Members are asked to include INCHEs activities in their fund-raising efforts.