

NIEHS collaborates with World Health Organization to address global environmental health issues

By Sheila Yong

NIEHS reached a significant milestone in its quest to improve global environmental health, when it was designated in September as a World Health Organization (WHO) Collaborating Centre for Environmental Health Sciences. John Balbus, M.D., NIEHS senior advisor for public health, will head the new center.

"This designation is important for NIEHS, because it enhances the Institute's ability to develop effective partnerships and also provide leadership on global environmental health issues," Balbus said. "Building on decades of collaboration with the World Health Organization, the Collaborating Centre will provide a focal point and resource for the Institute in fulfilling its strategic goals in global environmental health."

A partnership for environmental health

The most recent designation as a Collaborating Centre comes after three productive decades of partnership with WHO. The partnership began with a memorandum of understanding, and culminated in the first cooperative agreement in the early 1980's, an effort overseen by William Suk, Ph.D.

This agreement, [commemorated](http://www.who.int/ceh/publications/30years_partnership/en/index.html) (http://www.who.int/ceh/publications/30years_partnership/en/index.html) in recent highlights produced by WHO, played an important role in the development of WHO's International Programme on Chemical Safety. It led to the publication of many Environmental Health Criteria documents on chemical hazards, the promotion of children's environmental health as a global environmental health research priority (see [story](#)), and numerous other scientific workshops and capacity building initiatives. It also led to recent collaborations with WHO and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), such as the hosting of the 2011 PAHO biennial meeting of regional environmental health Collaborating Centres (see [story](#)).

The creation of the Collaborating Centre would not have been possible without the commitment and dedication of the NIEHS Global Environmental Health Working Group and Steering Committee, which includes staff from divisions and offices across the Institute with interest and expertise in global environmental health issues.

Striving for a healthier global environment

Under the new designation, NIEHS will assist WHO in promoting international cooperation among environmental health research institutes around the world; promoting global awareness of emerging issues in environmental health, such as children's environmental health, the developmental origins of health and disease (DOHaD), health implications of climate change, and household air pollution; and preparation of training materials, and support of education and training efforts in environmental and occupational health sciences.

The Collaborating Centre will kick off its activities with a satellite event, facilitating a network of WHO Collaborating Centres for Children's Environmental Health, at the Pacific Basin Consortium for Environment and Health; a satellite event on environmental exposures at the upcoming DOHaD annual conference; and a monthly webinar series on global environmental health in partnership with PAHO.

NIEHS and NTP Director Linda Birnbaum, Ph.D., believes the creation of the new Collaborating Centre comes at the right time.

"Modern health advances have led to longer life spans and a better standard of living, but environmental pollution threatens to take away those gains. NIEHS science is demonstrating the harm that comes from exposures to chemicals like endocrine disruptors and other developmental toxins, and how early life exposures to these can contribute to adult chronic diseases," said Birnbaum. "We are also building our understanding of how climate change affects human health. By joining forces, NIEHS and WHO will ensure issues involving environmental health will stay in the forefront and help translate research findings into effective public health interventions to improve health around the world."

(Sheila Yong, Ph.D., is a visiting fellow in the NIEHS Laboratory of Signal Transduction.)



Balbus will direct the activities of the new WHO Collaborating Centre for Environmental Health Sciences. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)

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