

## **Anniversary meeting underscores issues in children's environmental health**

By Joe Balintfy

Collaboration, communication, and recognition of the broad scope of research in children's health were just a few of the themes featured during the [Children's Environmental Health and Disease Prevention Research Centers](#) (Children's Centers) annual meeting Oct. 29-30 in Washington, D.C.

As researchers, scientists, and administrators celebrated the [15-year anniversary](#) (<http://epa.gov/ncer/events/calendar/2013/oct29/addinfo.html>) of the Children's Centers, which are jointly funded by NIEHS and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), speakers highlighted the importance of the collaborative effort and looked forward to advancing research in emerging areas of interest, including obesity, endocrine-disrupting chemicals, and epigenetics.

"Whether you're physicians, nurses, other healthcare providers, scientists, NGOs [non-governmental organizations], parents, or family members, all of you are really driving EPA and the federal government to do better and better, as we try to identify the real challenges our children are facing," said EPA Administrator, Gina McCarthy. "And, when it comes down to it, that's what we're all working for. We're working for the future."

### **Collaborating and pooling resources**

NIEHS and NTP Director Linda Birnbaum, Ph.D., added, "Environmental health is really too broad a field to have it all in one narrow area. People have to talk to each other and bring different approaches and tools together."

Communicating and collaborating are exactly what many participants devote their time to accomplishing. For example, Margaret Karagas, Ph.D., director of the new Children's Center at Dartmouth College, and Kari Nadeau, M.D., Ph.D, an investigator in the Dartmouth Children's Center, as well as the University of California (UC), Berkeley/Stanford Children's Center, commented that they meet with program officers and people from NIEHS and EPA, and collaborate with other Children's Centers, so they can learn, generate new ideas, and think creatively about what can be done together to make programs even stronger.

"Meeting Dr. Nadeau at the last meeting led to an exciting new collaboration, investigating the effects of *in utero* arsenic exposure on newborn immunity, using the sophisticated Stanford laboratory," said Karagas. "In our new Children's Center, we will investigate the impacts of environmental contaminants, such as arsenic on children's vaccine response."

### **Broad scope of centers and study**

"It's enormous," said Gregory Diette, M.D., of Johns Hopkins University, who gave a review of air cleaners and asthma research. "It's mind boggling how much stuff has been done and done so well."

More than a dozen sessions and presentations included remarks from more than 40 experts. Topics included food safety, air pollution, chemicals in consumer products, brain function, and a variety of disease areas.

The Children's Centers program lead at NIEHS, Kimberly Gray, Ph.D., said that several themes crossed over the various sessions, including a need to assess combined factors. "The cumulative effects of living in a poor environment, how that accelerates risk, and the impact of chronic exposures to toxic substances are powerful determinants of health."

### **Children's health congressional briefing**

At the end of the Children's Centers annual meeting, Birnbaum, along with a handful of presenters and attendees, went to the Hill for a congressional briefing hosted by Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, D-N.Y.

James Johnson, Ph.D., director of the National Center for Environmental Research in the Office of Research and Development at EPA, described it as an opportunity to explain to policymakers how the Children's Centers are doing research to understand the relationship between environmental exposure and children's health.

He noted the significance of communicating with lawmakers. "They have a great impact upon what action items we can really turn into policy, so they're not only options anymore, they become mandates for protecting our children's health," he said.

Johnson added that it's necessary for information from the Children's Centers to also be shared with health care providers, parents, and the community, so that they can take action to reduce risks to children, as well.

There are now 16 Children's Centers across the country generating practical information about improving children's environmental health.

## Communication also seen as key

Gray also stressed the importance of coordinated messaging, using the example of arsenic in apple juice presented in the opening session, "Hot Topics in Food Safety and Children's Health."

"A coordinated approach with Consumer Reports, FDA [U.S. Food and Drug Administration], and research scientists would have been more informative and helpful to the public than the mixed messages projected by the media," she said.

The day one closing keynote by Randy Olson, Ph.D., also emphasized communication, with advice on how to keep scientific messages simple, clear, and succinct so they will have broader reach. He shared an app, known as Connection Storymarker, to help users focus, structure, and strengthen their messages.

Yet even with research partnerships, progress, and an app, Birnbaum reminded attendees, environmental health research cannot be fully effective unless the community is involved.

"We're not telling the communities what to do. We're getting in there, and the communities are telling us what their concerns are, how to deal with them, how do we work together, everyone, to make better lives for our children and ourselves," she said.

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*In her opening remarks, McCarthy underscored the idealism in the Children's Centers mission, to use research on the environmental triggers of disease to support preventive efforts for promoting children's optimal health. (Photo courtesy of EPA)*



*Birnbaum pointed to the need for team science and transdisciplinary approaches, to translate research findings into prevention of disease. (Photo courtesy of EPA)*



*Gray is the NIEHS program lead for the NIEHS/EPA Children's Centers. She is also involved in the [National Children's Study](#), through a partnership with the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute for Child Health and Human Development, the lead institute for the study. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)*

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