

News Article about the 2004 Conference

Congress Pressed To Fund Study On Environmental Toxins And Children's Health

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Pediatricians and chemical industry officials are urging Congress to fund a landmark study that would track children nationwide from the womb to age 21 to determine the impact that chemical exposures and other environmental factors have on their health.

Industry officials say the findings would help regulators more effectively target the most significant threats to children's health, and avoid needless controls. At the same time, pediatricians are pushing congressional appropriators for more than \$27 million to conduct the comprehensive study, arguing that rising asthma rates and mercury pollution make funding the study a major priority.

Meanwhile, staff for Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-NY) say she will soon reintroduce legislation to fund a national network to integrate information on chronic diseases and environmental exposures.

Children's health advocates from the Partnership for Children's Health and the Environment briefed Senate and House staff April 28 on the need to fund the national children's study and on health-tracking.

"When completed, the national children's study will be the richest information resource for questions related to child health that this country has ever seen, and will form the basis of child health guidance and policy for generations to come," Dr. Philip Landrigan, director of the Center for Children's Health and the Environment, told Senate staff. "This study will make unique and significant contributions to our understanding of how behavioral, social and environmental factors in early life may cause or predispose individuals to certain chronic diseases or conditions."

Federal agencies including EPA have already allocated \$12 million for the study. However, work was delayed last year because because of budget shortfalls in fiscal year 2004.

Landrigan said new evidence is emerging that environmental factors are playing a key role in rising rates of asthma, learning and developmental disabilities, children's cancer rates and some birth defects. He also argued that a better understanding of health risks to children will save money in the long run by cutting the cost of health care. "When lead was removed from gasoline and paint, billions of dollars were saved in terms of health care costs and lost income, according to the Centers for Disease Control," Landrigan said. "By removing other environmental toxins, we could experience significant cost savings as a society."

Chemical industry representatives also urged Congress to fund the study, saying that more information about the greatest environmental threats to children will lead agencies to better target specific hazards. "We believe that the National Children's Study will create better data for better decisions. We believe that a strong scientific foundation for setting children's health priorities helps to ensure that resources are focused on protecting children from factors that pose the greatest risks," the American Chemistry Council says in an April 28 statement.

The children's health partnership also proclaimed its support for a national health tracking network like the one proposed by Clinton in 2002. At the briefing, a Clinton staffer said the senator is poised to introduce legislation that would authorize funds already appropriated to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and a host of states. The bill is a major priority for environmentalists and public health advocates seeking better information about the potential links between chronic diseases and environmental factors, such as air pollution and chemical exposure.

In addition, the partnership strongly urged EPA to tighten its proposals to regulate mercury emissions from power plants, saying mercury poses a significant health risk to children that could become a major public health problem akin to lead exposure from the early 1970s.

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