

Comité consultatif d'experts sur la santé des enfants et l'environnement en Amérique du Nord
Consejo Consultivo de Expertos sobre Salud Infantil y Medio Ambiente en América del Norte
Expert Advisory Board on Children's Health and the Environment in North America

25 September 2003

ADVICE TO COUNCIL: 03-03

Continuing Work on Risk Assessment and Children's Health and the Environment

The Expert Advisory Board on Children's Health and the Environment in North America (hereinafter referred to as the 'Expert Advisory Board' or the 'Board') of the Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC):

HAVING participated in the North American Workshop on Risk Assessment and Children's Environmental Health, organized by the CEC and the North American Free Trade Agreement Technical Working Group on Pesticides in Oaxaca, Mexico, 19–21 February 2003;

APPRECIATIVE of the quality and breadth of presentations and contributions to this workshop;

NOTING, however, that there is still much to learn about risk assessment, there are knowledge gaps to fill, and trained practitioners are in short supply;

UNDERSTANDING Council's interest in exploring follow-up work in the area of risk assessment;

CONTRIBUTES the following for consideration by Council:

1. There is a need to develop a conceptual framework for risk assessment for children that allows for a common understanding of its complexity and limitations and takes into account the special vulnerabilities of children, including their unique micro-environmental, physiological and behavioral factors.

There is urgent need to expand the use of epidemiologic data in risk assessment to ensure that children are adequately protected from prevalent environmental hazards. While epidemiologic studies are not always available, such studies should be preferentially used in risk assessment for contaminants that are present in children's environments. When epidemiologic data are not available for prevalent exposures, then conducting epidemiologic studies should be a priority of environmental health agencies.

A useful first step would be for each country to produce an inventory of existing resource material on the subject and to task the CEC Secretariat with the responsibility for housing this information and making it available.

Another important step would be to support a trilateral case study on the assessment of specific substances or group of substances and sharing this work among risk assessors. Important candidate substances for such a case study are lead, pesticides and, particularly, herbicides, and air pollutants.

2. A series of steps are recommended to begin addressing the need for building capacity and the training of new practitioners in the field of risk assessment, risk management and risk communication, with a focus on the special vulnerabilities of children. In particular, we recommend increasing the number of researchers and risk assessment practitioners who have formal degrees in epidemiology and toxicology.
 - Promote the development of epidemiologic expertise and institutional activities focused on the environmental risks to children in order to support risk management decisions and risk communication. It would be advisable in this to pay particular attention to support for Mexico.
 - Promote the development and implementation of basic training courses to train risk assessors and risk communicators that could fill the three countries' needs for expertise in the area of children's vulnerabilities. Relevant themes could be the concept of training the trainers and the training of specialists in multiple disciplines and from different sectors, including local health care providers. Support from academic institutions should be solicited.
 - Build on existing national science policies and encourage the development of new ones aimed at orienting efforts within educational and research institutions in support of producing specialists in epidemiology, risk assessment and risk communication and creating programs of research aimed at improving knowledge of environmental risks for children.
 - Promote capacity building at the community level, drawing on the experience of nongovernmental organizations in working on environmental epidemiology, risk assessment, and risk communication—all focused on children.
 - Encourage the development of targeted public outreach, community participation and risk communication strategies focusing on children.
3. Finally, industry produces and manages data vital to risk assessment and should be encouraged to make these data and related information accessible to those engaged in the work of risk assessment and risk communication.