

3rd Annual Town Hall Meeting
Saturday, March 1, 2008

Translating Breast Cancer & Environmental Research into Action: Integrating Biological, Human and Community-
Based Research

A Summary

The Bay Area Breast Cancer and the Environment Research Center (BABCERC) held its 3rd Annual Town Hall Meeting at Preservation Park near Oakland's City Center. The day began with a music and line dance ice breaker by the Northern California Soul Strutters, a local dance group who invited the day's participants to join them on stage to learn a little line dancing and get their energy moving.

Janice Barlow opened the program by describing the broad spectrum of information to be discussed during the day, beginning with the role of the internal, somatic environment at the cellular/molecular level, moving on to epidemiological studies in young girls, in communities and following this idea of environmental impact all the way to the presentation by keynote speaker, Mark Schapiro, who spoke about the significance of environmental regulations on the global economy.

This meeting reflected the goals of BABCERC—to generate useful knowledge and to communicate and disseminate that knowledge so that it can inform personal decision-making, eliminate health disparities and have an impact on public policy. One of the ways that BABCERC seeks to do this is by identifying and lessening the number of environmental toxins to which we are all exposed.

Dr. Robert A. Hiatt, BABCERC's director, explained that the value of research findings is, in part, determined by its usefulness. It is not enough for the scientists themselves to understand the results. They also need to commit to educating the public. In order to attain the ultimate research goal set by BABCERC, which is to decrease the incidence of breast cancer in the next generation, the community needs to understand the process of science and its application, as well as the outcomes that may have an effect on the products people buy, their lifestyles, and the policies that are made at local, state and federal levels.

In the first of three sequential panels, the speakers described the process by which BABCERC seeks to work and affect change. As Dr. Paul Yaswen explained, this process begins with a question; in this case, why has breast cancer been on the rise? In traditional scientific circles, a hypothesis, or possible answer to the question, is made by scientists, which is then structured into a study and undertaken as research to figure out whether or not the hypothesis is valid. Then conclusions are drawn and articles are published in scientific journals, which are generally read by other scientists, to document the findings.

Dr. Mary Helen Barcellos-Hoff, whose research focuses on the multicellular processes that cause breast cancer, described the biology of the mouse mammary gland, how it responds to carcinogens, and how the mouse mammary gland is used as a research substitute for the human breast.

Dr. Zena Werb illustrated the importance of the cellular environment from a different perspective by examining how the micro-environment affects what a tumor does, why cancer cells are abnormal or "souped up", and why increased breast tissue density is a risk factor in breast cancer.

At the conclusion of the first panel of speakers, there was a lively Question and Answer period in which participants displayed a particular interest in the results of the CYGNET Study, which is one of three prospective epidemiology studies nationwide examining predictors of early puberty in young girls. It is believed that early development may be related to an increased breast cancer risk. Dr. Lawrence H. Kushi, BABCERC's principal investigator for the study, explained that although substantial racial differences have been noted, no conclusions have yet been drawn from the data that has been collected thus far.

The second panel addressed the role of community participation in the research process. Dr. Marion Kavanaugh-Lynch spoke about the value of funding participatory research, which has led to the development of unique and relevant research questions, the involvement of underserved populations, and the rapid translation of research results to the community for immediate use.

Carla Perez, Northern California Program Director, Communities for a Better Environment, and Dr. Rachel Morello-Frosch, Associate Professor UC Berkeley, Department of Environmental Science, each described the benefits and challenges of community-based research and the scientific and ethical challenges associated with reporting back individual-level personal findings.

The afternoon session focused on the translation of research results to Public Policy. California Assemblywoman Fiona Ma recounted the story of her victorious legislative battle to ban the use of phthalates, which are used to make plastic softer. Phthalates have been banned in the European Union for 14 years, but continue to be used in the United States despite their possible influence in the early onset of puberty in girls. Assemblywoman Ma discussed the necessity of using the precautionary principle in situations where toxicity has not yet been proven but is considered a strong possibility.

Yvonne Beals provided an update of California State Senator Carole Migden's efforts to address the presence of toxic chemical compounds in cosmetic products, such as lipstick and nail polish. Julia Liou, co-founder of the California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative, described the Collaborative's preventive agenda to ensure the health and safety of the nail salon community.

Mark Schapiro, Editorial Director for the Center for Investigative Reporting and author of the new book *Exposed: The Toxic Chemistry of Everyday Products and What's at Stake for American Power*, drew powerful comparisons concerning the differences in how the European Union and the United States have responded to the presence of toxic chemicals in products we use daily.

The Town Hall Meeting was an excellent demonstration of the ways in which collaboration around a central issue can change public policy, make our consumables safer and contribute to the elimination of breast cancer in future generations.