



Women's Healthy Environments Network Herstory and Winter/Spring 2003 update

Women's Healthy Environments Network - WHEN A woman's body is a child's first environment.

Since its inception in 1994, the Women's Healthy Environments Network has been educating the media, policy makers and general public to the fact that environmental health is a key determinant of public health. WHEN actively promotes the primary prevention of environmentally linked health problems such as cancer, asthma, immune system related conditions and others by educating for the reduction of toxic emissions; a shift to safe production models, biological agriculture and lawn care; more efficient, renewable energy sources; affordable public transportation and other sustainable programs.

Recognizing that increasingly people are calling for clean and safe air, food, water and soil, WHEN organizes and participates on many different levels in a variety of activities. Information is disseminated through workshops, courses, public meetings, conferences, panel discussions and displays in venues such as communities, schools, universities, faith communities and workplaces. WHEN works in collaboration with teachers, students, women's, environmental, health professionals, grass root and community groups, unions, institutions and the like, and disseminates information through fact sheets, videos and other materials. WHEN is seen as a unique, focused, action oriented NGO that has established itself as an innovative, cutting edge, popular education leader.

WHEN draws on expertise such as The International Joint Commission on the Great Lakes (IJC) biennial reports; the Recommendations of the Ontario Task Force on the Primary Prevention of Cancer (1995); Davis, D. L. et al., "Rethinking Breast Cancer Risk and the Environment: The Case for the Precautionary Principle," *Environmental Health Perspectives*, Vol 106, No. 9, September 1998; and "Environmental Standard Setting and Children's Health: a study by Canadian Environmental Law Association (CELA) and the Ontario College of Family Physicians Environmental Health Committee (2000)" • all of which call for the use of the **precautionary principle**. This principle, increasingly recognized within rigorous scientific communities, is one which guides policies and practice with a preventive orientation rather than waiting to establish full scientific certainty of harm of environmental contamination (Wingspread Conference, 1998).

While WHEN focuses on the primary prevention of women's environmental health related conditions associated with radiation and hormone disruptors¹ (such as breast and other reproductive system cancers), it also addresses relevant impacts on the health of children, men and indeed all life on earth. Impacts on children can result in learning disabilities, attention deficit disorders, birth defects and cancers. Impacts on men may initiate or promote prostate or testicular cancer and lowered sperm counts, infertility, deformed genitalia and the like.

¹. A gendered examination of most health/medical research is important in the context of environmental health determinants where adoption of the precautionary principle is necessary due to the fact that most of the thousands of approved chemicals in use today have not been evaluated for their effects during particular stages or **windows of vulnerability** in women's and girls' lives. These stages include breast development, hormonal cycles, pregnancy, lactation and menopause. Nor have their synergistic effects been adequately examined (in view of the likelihood that breast and other reproductive cancers arise from multiple factors). As Dr. Ross Hume Hall asks "Whatever happened to fetal exposures, puberty, development and function of breasts and other special features of female biology?" (R.H. Hall, Panel on Breast Cancer and the Environment, Ottawa, 1995).

EXPOSURE Winner BEST HEALTH DOCUMENTARY, 2001, New York International Independent Film Festival!

Created as educational tools for WHEN's work, **EXPOSURE: Environmental Links to Breast Cancer** and the resource guide Taking Action for a Healthy Future were launched at the First World Conference on Breast Cancer in Kingston, Ontario in 1997. **Exposure** has been broadcast on CBC Newsworld, TVO, Women's Television Network and several international broadcast outlets. Nominated for a Gemini Award, it has been screened and discussed in numerous cities in Canada and internationally; and is now available in English, French, Bahasa Indonesian, Cantonese, Mandarin, Hebrew, Serbian Croatian and Spanish (The Spanish version, produced in Mexico, is especially important because many pesticides, herbicides and fungicides are heavily used in agriculture in Central and South America and in agricultural rich California. This corresponds with the rising rates of breast and other cancers in those countries, and particularly Non Hodgkin's lymphoma, known to be associated with pesticide use.) Several organizations working in multi-cultural communities are using **Exposure** in their community outreach.

The film was given considerable prominence in an article on the late Dr. Nicole Bruinsma in Saturday Night Magazine (The Accidental Crusader, May 2001) in which she described how, for her "the penny dropped" when seeing it at the First World Conference on Breast Cancer which motivated her to become a pesticide bylaw advocate. This moving article, according to reports, stimulated Loblaw's VP, public relations decision to formulate the policy for the some 400 Loblaw's garden centres to "go green" in spring, 2003.

As the year 2003 unfolds, the work of the Women's Healthy Environments Network is reflected in some other policy changes occurring in mainstream influential organizations, locally and nationally. WHEN can point with pride to its role with others in the Canadian Cancer Society recommending a ban on the ornamental use of pesticides based on precautionary principle reflecting the international Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) World Health Association weight of evidence and stimulated by grass roots pressure. It is acknowledged that this major policy breakthrough was in large-part due to the encouragement of community groups across the country (many of whom have been using **Exposure** in their educational work).

Another milestone was the Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation (Ontario chapter) focusing on primary prevention/ environmental health as their key theme in their annual October day of Awareness (2002). As such, they invited epidemiologist, Devra Lee Davis (who figures prominently in **Exposure**) as their keynote lunchtime speaker and Elizabeth May, ED of the Sierra Club as the keynote breakfast speaker. Suffice to say, environmental health awareness has also increased in recent years due to events such as smog days, asthma, the Walkerton, Ontario water tragedy, increased cancer rates...which have increased concerns, hence the greater need for educational resources and follow up actions.

PROGRAMS

TRAINING TRAINERS workshops assist participants in becoming 'environmental health multipliers' - e.g. lead discussions, speak at conferences, organize educational screenings, educate colleagues, families, friends, professional associations etc. In addition to addressing personal lifestyles, these workshops often lead to adopting a community health approach framed within the broad socio-environmental perspectives of health promotion as reflected in the goals of the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (1986) - To strengthen community action, develop personal skills, create supportive environments, help to educate, enable, mediate and advocate well-being.

WHEN held a successful, well attended Training Trainers workshop on children's health and the environment in 2002 using materials from the Canadian Environmental Law Association and Ontario College of Family Physician's Environmental Health Committee Report, **Environmental Standard Setting**

and Children's Health. Kathy Cooper, CELA researcher and a co author was a featured speaker. It is anticipated that another such workshop will be held at in the future.

EDUCATION FOR A HEALTHY FUTURE, a program initiated with **Exposure**, helps workshop participants from different community, social, cultural, workplace or educational contexts to evaluate effective ways of learning and to develop confidence and skills to integrate primary prevention into their ongoing work. Guidelines were developed with these diverse groups for effective educational work in community and/or other group situations where appropriate.

IF YOU LOVE OUR CHILDREN: Children's Health and the Environment (working title), WHEN's current film education program under way, is a three-part project consisting of a film, production of print materials and communication and education programming including versioning into French. The producers have entered into a co-production agreement with the **National Film Board of Canada** (NFB) for the development stage of the film. Following that, it is anticipated that co-production of the film will ensue in which the NFB would collaborate on broadcast sales, distribution and marketing. (Co-production with the NFB requires that we raise 51% of the total budget to their 49%.) A 12 minute promotional clip has been produced for awareness and fundraising. (Please contact the office to obtain a copy of it and/or the film proposal.)

Memberships/Collaboration: WHEN is a member of:

- * The executive of the National Networks of Environment and Women's Health (NNEWH) Centres of Excellence, York University (funded by the Women's Bureau of Health Canada) to encourage women's health and environments perspectives within the partnership - 30 academics and community organizations across Canada. With project funding from NNEWH, WHEN has been disseminating valuable women's health and environments documents produced by WHEN and others (funded by NNEWH). WHEN is currently conducting a survey which will hopefully lead to the NNEWH partners integrating women's health and environment issues in their own research and programs.
- * The Occupational and Environmental Health Working Group of the City of Toronto Cancer Prevention Coalition (with the Board of Health).
- * The Cancer Prevention Interest Group at the Centre for Health Promotion, U of T and through that group, helped to organize an informative meeting with the leadership of the Canadian Cancer Society regarding their ban on the ornamental use of pesticides based on the precautionary principle.
- * The Partnership for Pesticide Bylaws for the City of Toronto, currently under way
- * Both the Canadian and US Partnerships on Children's Health and the Environment

Invited Health Canada and Environment Canada Deputations (2002, 2003):

- * The Health and Environment Ministers Meeting of the Americas (HEMA) (prior to the World Summit on Sustainable Development, Johannesburg, 2002) Ottawa, 2002;
- * Environment Canada's Bill C-53 The Pesticide Control Products Act, Ottawa, 2002;
- * Environment Canada's Children's Health and the Environment, Toronto, 2002.
- * Health Canada's Environmental Assessment Regulations Consultation on the assessment of substances in products regulated under the Food and Drug Act with respect to their potential effect on the environment and human health, Ottawa, 2003.
- * Health Canada's Public Consultation on Proposed Regulations for the Expansion of Food Irradiation in Canada, December, 2002 (a WHEN volunteer initiative).

PARTICIPATION: Presentations/community highlights - primarily by volunteers.

2003: Sunnybrook Women's College Hospital Women's Health Matters Conference, Toronto, January; University Women's Club, Toronto, February; Early Childhood Education Program, George Brown College, March; Beyond Vinyl: Alternatives to PVCs, Toronto, March; Pesticide Action Program, Grass Roots Orillia, April; My Body Politic: Choices, Illness and Care (Gilda's Club), April; Environment and

Health Conference: Prevention, Promotion and Patient Care; Table Ronde Sante, pesticides et environnement, Lyon, France, May.

2002: the South Riverdale Community Health Centre launch of Environmental Health Fact Sheets; Learning for a Sustainable Future; Toronto, Spring, EcoFair, Oakville ON; World Conference on Breast Cancer, Victoria BC, June; 9th International Women's Health Meeting, August; Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation (CBCF) Awareness Days, October (for the past 6 years); Breast Cancer Research and Education Fund Conference, Niagara Falls ON, November; Willowdale Community Neighbourhood Group on Pesticide Action; WCB Toastmasters, Toronto; Association of Women of India in Canada (AWIC, presentation to Board and article in newsletter).

2001 and earlier:

Everyday Carcinogens: Stopping Cancer Before It Starts (McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario); the Ontario Breast Cancer Information Exchange Information and Support Think Tank; Workshops with Health Care Professionals for Environmental Education; and, SISTERING A Woman's Place (2 locations); "Women and Environment", the Canadian Bar Association (FLAS) May 2001; 2nd International Symposium on the Effectiveness of Health Promotion, May 2001; The Oakville Environmental Peace Festival, 2001; The Connections Workshop-Working Together for Social and Eco Systems Healing, Hamilton, Ontario, 2001; the primary prevention programs of the First, Second and Third World Conferences on Breast Cancer 1997, 1999, 2002; other deputations ie Great Lakes hearings (1999). October Is, an event with **Exposure** in multiple languages, 1999.

Previous Coordinated Programs

Co coordination of the environmental health sector of the **9th International Women and Health Meeting**, York University, August 2002.

Bridging community and academic programs, the course, **Environmental Health, Transformative Learning and Policy Change: Education for Social and Ecosystem Healing** was offered by WHEN in collaboration with the Transformative Learning Centre, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto (OISE/UT) and the Centre for Health Promotion, U of T, for several years. It has continued in 2002 and 2003 in the Department of Theory and Policy Studies at OISE/UT.

The CANADIAN CO2 REDUCTION INITIATIVE - initiated in 1998 - it addressed the relationship of climate change and health. Participants voluntarily took on the responsibility of reducing personal CO2 emissions by using bicycles and public transportation to limit car use, eating locally produced organic food when possible and, generally becoming aware of their own personal impact on Climate Change. Originally funded by the Toronto Atmospheric Fund, this project continued in 2000 with the support of a grant from Environment Canada's Climate Change Action Fund - Outreach Program.

"VIDEO VERDE": WHEN organized a well attended monthly environmental health film festival from fall 1999 to spring 2000, in collaboration with the International Institute of Concern for Public Health and the Sierra Club, Eastern Canada Chapter.

THE ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH PROGRAM of the Seventh Annual Health Promotion Summer School of the Centre for Health Promotion of the University of Toronto. WHEN co-coordinated this program (offered for the first time). June 2000.

For further information, contact WHEN [A Registered Charitable Organization # 11926 2533]
24 Mercer Street Suite 102, Toronto On M5V 1H3 Ph 416 928 0880 when@web.ca whenenvironments.ca