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## Solutions for Cancer Organizations

It's rare to hear words like "carcinogen," "chemical risk," or "radionuclide" in the hallways and inner sanctums of most cancer agencies and hospitals. Tobacco, yes. Diet, yes. Alcohol and exercise, yes. But personal care products? Air pollutants? Contaminants in food and water? Not very often.

**The Center for Environmental Oncology of the University of Pittsburgh Cancer Institute (UPCI)** is a

world leader when it comes to the environmental links to cancer. It embraces traditional "lifestyle" factors such as smoking, alcohol, diet and exercise, but it also includes cancer hazards in the air, water, soil and food, as well as ingredients in personal care products. The whole health profile of people living in Pittsburgh depends on their neighborhoods, their work conditions, their racial and ethnic origins and their income levels.

While most cancer institutions focus on crusades for the cure, the Center for

Medical, patient, public health and environmental groups that share some of the same concerns too often have not worked together toward common goals ...

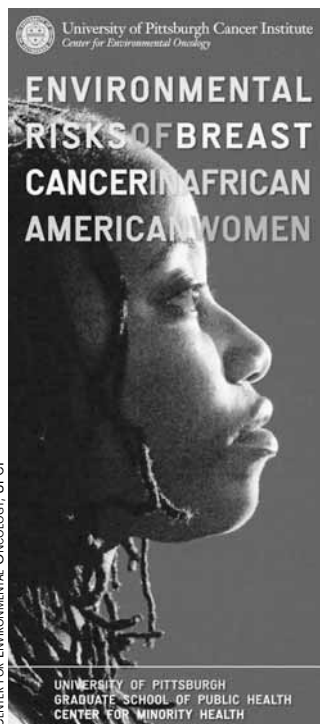
Everyone concerned — health-affected groups, scientists, health professionals and environmental organizations — can serve as resources for each other in collaborations that will help reduce public exposure to environmental toxicants.

— Philip R. Lee, MD, Chairman,  
Collaborative on Health and the Environment

Environmental Oncology of the UPCI, by contrast, synthesizes the blizzard of data about the environmental links to cancer and converts positive associations into public policy and patient education programs, with an emphasis on primary prevention and precaution.

Dr. Devra Davis, author of the award-winning book, *When Smoke Ran Like Water*, and *The Secret History of the War on Cancer*, is the driving force behind the center, which opened in 2004. She writes: "Given enough knowledge and the ability to make changes, individuals can take action to avoid at least some of the known cancer-causing agents or carcinogens in their daily lives, thus lowering personal risks of getting cancer during their lifetimes."<sup>1</sup>

One example: It is well established that African-American women under 40 have a higher risk of breast cancer than other categories of women. It's also known that the more estrogen a woman is exposed to during her lifetime, the greater her risk of contracting breast cancer. In 2005 the center followed up a study of African-American girls who had developed breasts and pubic hairs as toddlers. The study identified one common factor among these young girls — all of their mothers had used creams containing hormones to style their children's hair. The girls stopped developing breasts when their mothers



CENTER FOR ENVIRONMENTAL ONCOLOGY, UPCI

Cover of the Center for Environmental Oncology's information brochure.

stopped using the hair creams.<sup>2</sup> A simple, basic example of the precautionary principle in action.

Many shampoos, styling gels and cosmetics targeted to African-Americans contain chemicals known to act like estrogens when applied to the scalp or body. And while there's no conclusive proof that these hair products are linked to breast cancer, there's enough evidence to warrant concern. The Pittsburgh center offers consumer-friendly information about the issue — and on specific products — in its Guide to Green Living website: [www.environmentaloncology.org/green\\_living.htm](http://www.environmentaloncology.org/green_living.htm).

Another departure from the mainstream is the public stand taken in 2002 by the **Canadian Cancer Society (CCS)** against “ornamental” pesticides containing known or probable carcinogens used in public places and gardens. It was CCS's first major step into the toxics-use fray following its formal adoption of the precautionary principle as a core belief. This CCS position has proved valuable to dozens of Canadian municipalities that are working to restrict or ban lawn and garden pesticides, a cause that was further strengthened when the Ontario College of Family Physicians released its *Pesticides Literature Review* in April 2004.<sup>3</sup> In 2005 CCS took another stand for precaution by endorsing a strong advocacy statement on occupational exposure.<sup>4</sup>

The **Collaborative on Health and Environment (CHE)**, based in California with members mainly in the US and Canada, is a diverse partnership of health professionals, scientists, concerned individuals and organizations working together to address concerns about links between environmental factors and human

health, including cancer. Underlying CHE's activities are commitments to strong, uncompromised science and to the precautionary principle when compelling evidence of potential for harm to human health and the environment exists.

Their resources include:

- *Environmental and Occupational Causes of Cancer: A Review of Recent Scientific Literature.*
- CHE Toxicants and Disease Database, a searchable database summarizing links between chemical contaminants and approximately 200 diseases or conditions.

Goals of the Center for Environmental Oncology, UPCI, include:

- Building links from basic research to clinical studies of avoidable carcinogens, including hormonally mediated agents
- Developing and applying state-of-the-art technology to the identification of carcinogenic exposures
- Pilot-testing institutional interventions to modify cancer risks consistent with “greening” facilities, and providing healthy options regarding exercise, nutrition and avoidable chemical exposures
- Educating and training health professionals and communities
- Informing patients, their families and communities about cancer risks and ways to reduce their chance of recurrence.

- Canadian Cancer Society: [www.cancer.ca](http://www.cancer.ca). Search “prevention” and “advocacy”
- Center for Environmental Oncology: [www.environmentaloncology.org](http://www.environmentaloncology.org)
- Collaborative on Health and the Environment: [www.healthandenvironment.org](http://www.healthandenvironment.org)
- Ontario College of Family Physicians: [www.ocfp.on.ca](http://www.ocfp.on.ca)