

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Mexico's National Workshop on Children's Health and the Environment, 21-22 June 2001

Speaking notes for Janine Ferretti

Secretary Frenk, Secretary Lichtinger, distinguished participants, it is a great pleasure and honor to be with you here today for this First National Workshop on Children's Health and the Environment. I would first like to congratulate you on the important announcement you have just made. As we learn more about the implications that a degraded environment can have for human health—and in particular the impacts on children—the benefits of forging stronger links between health and environment become increasingly clear. Thus, I commend you for having taken this important and forward-looking step.

I would also like to congratulate you on the convening of this workshop. Looking at the impressive list of participants who will be working together over the next 1 1/2 days, I am confident that this event will provide an excellent foundation for a coordinated national approach to achieving the twin goals of protecting the environment and safeguarding children's health.

Children's environmental health is an issue that concerns all of us. We value our children and thus want to ensure that they are born into a healthy environment and are able to reach their full potential as healthy, capable adults. It is also of concern to all of us because of the fact that we each have important roles to play. Protecting children's health is not only the task of health care professionals and public health policy makers, nor is solely up to those of us who work on environmental protection. It is a challenge that requires strong and sustained collaboration between these two sectors. In addition, it requires the involvement of a broad range of other individuals and groups, from parents to corporate leaders, from teachers to farmers, from scientists to public interest groups, just to name a few. The organization of this workshop is a concrete step towards establishing those important partnerships and engaging the key stakeholders that will need to be involved as the children's environmental health agenda in Mexico unfolds.

The development of appropriate policies, effective decision-making processes and sound programs at the national level is the backbone of any country's efforts to protect the health of its children. However, the need to protect the environment and concerns about children's health do not stop at national borders. In North America we share common ecosystems and have increasing economic and social ties among the three countries. Substances that can harm children's health can be transported long distances across national borders by wind, water and in goods traded in commerce. Recognizing these linkages, the CEC has identified children's environmental health as a priority area for trilateral collaboration.

Last year the CEC Council, comprised of the top environmental officials of the three North American countries, passed a Council Resolution calling for the development of a cooperative agenda to reduce human-made threats to children's health, with an initial focus on asthma and other respiratory illnesses and the effects of lead and other toxic substances. Increasing public

awareness, and providing parents and communities with information on environmental threats to their children's health, were also recognized as priority needs.

One of the recent and exciting developments in the CEC's children's environmental health initiative is the establishment of an Expert Advisory Board, comprised of three high-caliber experts from each country. This Board will advise Council on issues of children's health and the environment in North America. We are fortunate to have two of Mexico's nominees to this prestigious Board here with us in this workshop. We look forward to formally announcing the formation of this body soon, and to their active involvement in shaping the North American agenda for action on children's environmental health.

The existing work program of the CEC gives us a solid basis for taking on the challenging mandate of reducing environmental threats to children's health. The CEC's Sound Management of Chemicals (SMOC) program has a successful track record in addressing priority chemicals, including some of the 'dirty dozen' targeted in the recently signed Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs). Through the SMOC initiative, the Parties work together to develop and implement North American Regional Action Plans on substances of common concern. The regional action plan on DDT was a particularly notable achievement, with Mexico eliminating the use of DDT by replacing it with alternative methods of malaria control—and achieving this two years ahead of schedule.

Mercury is another substance that is being targeted for regional action. Because it can adversely affect neurological development, mercury is a substance that is of particular concern for children as well as for women of childbearing age. One of the key challenges related to mercury is the lack of public awareness about the dangers it can pose. Despite its risks, this highly toxic and persistent metal is being used in children's jewelry, ornaments and for medicinal purposes. These are unnecessary, preventable risks that can be addressed, in part, through better education and awareness. As part of the mercury regional action plan, we look forward to working with Semarnat, the Secretaria de Salud and other partners here in Mexico, and their Canadian and US counterparts, to develop a public awareness raising campaign on the risks posed by mercury and how to avoid them.

Another area of work related to reducing toxic threats to health and the environment is the CEC's Pollutant Release and Transfer Register (PRTR) project. For the past five years, the CEC has been tracking data on industrial sources of toxic chemicals and putting this information into the hands of citizens, communities, companies and policy makers through the publication of the annual *Taking Stock* reports. Currently the analyses are limited to data from Canada and the United States, however we look forward to including data from Mexico as it becomes available. Earlier this year at a tri-national meeting held here in Mexico City, the Mexican government renewed its commitment to put in place a mandatory reporting system and to make the data publicly accessible. This will be an important achievement for Mexico, and will make it possible for us to obtain, for the first time, a truly continental picture of the sources and handling of industrial pollutants in North America. Many of the substances tracked through PRTRs, such as carcinogens and developmental toxins, are of particular concern to children's health.

The CEC is also actively engaged in air quality issues. The effects of poor air quality on children's health are a recognized and widespread problem. Asthma rates have reached epidemic proportions in some parts of North America, and other respiratory problems plague large numbers of children throughout the continent. The CEC is working to facilitate collaboration among air quality officials in the three countries, and to compile continent-wide data on air pollutants of common concern. We are also looking to build on existing scientific work to gain better insight into the links between air quality and asthma in children. The effects on children's health of air pollution associated with traffic at the major border crossings is another issue that deserves further attention.

It is well known that preventing pollution is more effective and often cheaper than cleaning up after the fact. Recognizing the value of a preventive approach, the CEC has been actively engaged in pollution prevention, particularly here in Mexico. Through an innovative revolving loan program organized as a joint venture between the CEC and the Mexican Foundation for Technology Innovation and Transfer in Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (FUNTEC), a number of small businesses have benefited from low interest loans to finance pollution prevention improvements at their facilities. The results have been impressive, from both a financial and an environmental standpoint. The participating facilities improved their bottom line while achieving reductions in their use of toxic chemicals and their energy and water consumption.

One of the questions that we may wish to explore during this workshop is whether this model could be extended to other small businesses. For example, a number of micro-industries and artisans here in Mexico are using lead. This can contribute to local environmental contamination and cause exposure of workers and their families, as well as potential exposures via goods traded in commerce. We all know that lead is a substance that is particularly damaging to children, given its ability to cause learning disabilities and other ill effects. Would a project aimed at making it financially feasible for micro industries to reduce their use of lead be an effective strategy for reducing this toxic threat to children's health, while at the same time fostering sustainable economic development?

These are just some of the possible areas for collaborative work to reduce environmental threats to children's health. I look forward to hearing the outcomes of your deliberations over the coming 1 1/2 days, so that we can identify key opportunities for working together to tackle some of the challenging environmental issues that threaten the health of children.

In closing, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to participate in this auspicious occasion, and wish you a successful workshop.