

BREAST CANCER SUMMIT CALLS FOR EXPANDED STUDIES

A report from the International Summit on Breast Cancer and the Environment released in March 2003 concludes that the search for environmental links to breast cancer must be expanded.

The summit—a gathering of researchers, public health officials, and activists, held in Santa Cruz in May 2002—was charged with developing a broadly supported agenda for research into the relationship between breast cancer and the environment. More than 100 participants generated thousands of recommendations, which were eventually narrowed down to 28 high priorities organized into three areas: research, policy, and education and communication.

The document emphasizes the principles of community-based participatory research, an approach based on the idea that the community lies at the heart of public health. These same principles were employed in the planning of the summit itself.



“This report is the closest anybody’s come to developing a single voice on the issue of environmental links to breast cancer,” said Patricia Buffler, dean emerita and professor of epidemiology, who served as the summit’s principal investigator. “It was born out of a process that brought together groups with different perspectives, backgrounds, and agendas for a productive dialogue on a difficult topic.”

The report names specific improvements needed in research tools and techniques, such as improved exposure assessment; better biomarkers for exposure, disease, and susceptibility; and increased collaborative follow-up studies. In addition, it asserts that research should consider risk factors over a woman’s entire lifetime.

In the area of policy, the report’s recommendations include the establishment of a national biomonitoring program to track exposures using body fluids; integrating the precautionary principle into policy decisions; and promoting prevention messages in the breast cancer movement. The effects of smoking also emerged as a major concern at the summit, leading to the policy recommendation that passive smoking exposures be eliminated nationwide.

Moreover, the report encourages a national dialogue regarding breast cancer as a human rights issue and recommends that each national and state legislator be briefed, “not only on the breast cancer incidence in her/his district, but also within a larger context of national statistics, the research process, and the limitations of science.”

The process that led to the summit and the final report was facilitated by a secretariat composed of public health and environmental health experts working closely with Buffler, including Elize Brown, Caitlin Brune, Ben Fraticelli, Belma González, Elaina Jannell, Amy Kyle, Marj Plumb, and Wendy Strickland.

Berkeley researchers have submitted the report to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which funded the summit through a grant to the UC Berkeley Center for Family and Community Health. Other sponsors of the summit included the UC Berkeley Environmental Health Sciences Center, funded by the National Institute for Environmental Health Sciences and the Environmental Cancer Epidemiology Unit of the WHO International Agency for Research on Cancer. 