Learning and Developmental Disabilities Initiative
Michigan Meeting
October 27, 2004
NOTES

On Wednesday, October 27, 2004, nearly seventy people from Michigan and neighboring states participated in the first regional meeting of the national Learning and Developmental Disabilities Initiative (LDDI), a working group of the Collaborative on Health and the Environment (see www.cheforhealth.org). The Learning Disabilities Association of Michigan (LDA of MI) hosted this half-day conference, which was held on the Michigan State University campus at the Kellogg Center in East Lansing. Medical professionals, environmentalists, and child advocates came together to learn about neurotoxins and their impact on children's brain development.

The LDA of MI co-sponsored the conference with ICEH. Other organizations that helped with the planning included the Ecology Center, Michigan Environmental Council, Michigan Council for Maternal and Child Health, Bridges 4 Kids, American Academy of Pediatrics (Michigan Chapter), and the Michigan Lead Safe Partnership.

The program began with an overview of LDDI by Elise Miller, M.Ed., executive director of the Institute for Children's Environmental Health and coordinator of LDDI. She explained that LDDI is focused on galvanizing the learning and developmental disabilities sector nationally and regionally to work collectively to eliminate neurotoxicants that may impact brain development and contribute to the rising rates of these disabilities. LDDI's first major national meeting was held at the National Institutes of Health outside of Washington, DC last May. Currently over 130 organizations and individuals have joined LDDI. Elise added that the LDA of America, one of LDDI's strongest members, has developed a model program on environmental health known as the Healthy Children's Project, and now the LDA of MI has become a Project partner.

Elise also noted that according to recent studies, the incidence of learning and developmental disabilities appears to be rising dramatically, affecting about 17% of youth in the U.S. under the age of 18. Though there are many factors that influence child development, scientific studies show exposures to certain neurotoxicants such as lead, mercury, pesticides, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), solvents and other known and suspected neurotoxicants can contribute to neurological problems including learning and developmental disabilities (LDDs). She added, however, that only 12 chemicals had been tested thoroughly for neurtoxicity out of the 80,000 that have been put on the market since World War II, and that no toxicity data existed on 43 percent of the 15,000 chemicals most in use, according to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Elise finished her overview by saying that when there is the political will to remove chemical contaminants such as lead from products, then we can save millions of dollars in health care costs, not to mention the emotional hardships on families and communities.

Ted Schettler, MD, MPH, the science director of the Science and Environmental Health Network, then gave the keynote address, “Emerging Science on Neurotoxicants and Brain Development.” Ted reviewed how processes important for healthy brain development can be disrupted by chemical exposures early in fetal development and on through adolescence. Abnormal development can manifest as structural birth defects and functional abnormalities that may not even show up until decades later. He then described specific studies on mercury, lead, PCBs and brominated flame retardants to show how exposures to these contaminants may be linked to LDDs.

Next on the agenda was Amy Winans, executive director of theAssociation for Children's Mental Health and president of the LDA of MI. She described in more detail what the LDA of MI plans to undertake as a Healthy Children’s Project partner. She mentioned that they are offering mini-grants to non-profit organizations for education activities regarding environmental health and learning disabilities and will continue to collaborate with other organizations in Michigan to bring together diverse constituencies around these important children’s health issues.

William Weil, MD, Professor Emeritus of Pediatrics and Human Development, Michigan State University and member of the American Academy of Pediatrics (Michigan chapter), next presented some of the key concerns regarding lindane, which is a neurotoxic but continues to be used on children to remove lice. He noted that lindane is showing up in our fish (one bottle of lindane-containing shampoo can contaminate six million gallons of water), including those in Lake Superior and even in Alaska.

Mary Beth Doyle, MPH, Environmental Health program director with the Ecology Center, followed on the program. She highlighted the precautionary principle, which encourages taking preventative action in the face of uncertainty and shifting the burden of proof to the proponents on the activity. Mary Beth also noted that California currently has tighter legislation than other states in terms of reducing exposures to neurotoxicants and that there are opportunities in Michigan to press for new policies to help protect children. In addition, she mentioned steps you can take in your daily life to reduce your risks of exposure to neurotoxicants.

The workshop ended with a question and answer period. Questions included what the impact anti-depressants (and psychopharmacology in general) may have on the developing brain in addition to the neurtoxicants and whether mercury fillings can also be toxic. Suggestions included setting up a listserv among participants and having a follow-up meeting with those interested in exploring these environmental health issues further. Mary Beth mentioned that the Ecology Center would be happy to help with that and Amy reminded participants about the opportunity to apply for mini-grants from the LDA of MI to hold educational workshops elsewhere in the state on these concerns.

The LDA Board President, Ed Schlitt, concluded the program by thanking the audience for their interest and participation and inviting them to a reception.