ATSDR
AGENCY FOR TOXIC SUBSTANCES AND DISEASE REGISTRY

The Global Health Activities of

THE AGENCY FOR TOXIC SUBSTANCES AND DISEASE REGISTRY (ATSDR)

The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) assesses toxic waste sites, unplanned releases of toxins, and other sources of pollution so that exposure and adverse health effects can be prevented. Although most of ATSDR's work focuses on hazardous substances and waste sites in the United States, the agency collaborates with international health agencies (such as PAHO and WHO) and with health and environmental agencies in other countries – including India, Mexico, Brazil, and South Africa, among others – to help prevent similar adverse health effects in other countries.

Examples of how ATSDR contributes to CDC's global health objectives in each of five strategic areas are provided below.

Public Health Surveillance and Response

ATSDR has provided training to health and environmental officials from several countries in assessing the health hazards of waste sites and in responding to emergencies such as spills of hazardous substances. For example, ATSDR staff members conducted training courses in basic health assessment and emergency response in Taiwan and Spain. The agency's staff also are responsible for emergency preparedness and response in the U.S.-Mexico border area. As a participant in the U.S./Mexico Joint Response Team, ATSDR works with other federal, state, and local officials and industry representatives to achieve this mission.

Public Health Infrastructure and Capacity-Building

ATSDR has assisted other countries in building their capacity to deal with the health threats posed by hazardous substances. For example, ATSDR staff visited Mexico to conduct a workshop on hazardous substances for a group of 25 physicians. The workshop was part of an effort to organize a regional poison information and treatment system in Mexico. ATSDR also works with health and environmental agencies in South Africa to increase the country's capacity to control environmental hazards. This assistance will include supplying ATSDR technical documents to South Africa and providing training on using the documents. ATSDR is also developing a plan for collaborating with India on environmental and occupational health programs.

Disease and Injury Prevention and Control

ATSDR has provided technical assistance upon request to other countries in their efforts to prevent people from being exposed to hazardous substances. For example, ATSDR held a one-week health risk communication workshop in Pachuca, Mexico, to help develop a health risk communication plan for two rural communities that were contaminated by manganese. ATSDR staff also recently assisted PAHO, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and the Brazilian Ministry of Health in evaluating the public health impacts of releases from a pesticide plant in Brazil.

Applied Research for Effective Health Policies

ATSDR is involved in several projects that promote applied research for effective health policies. ATSDR provided funds to the University of Texas School of Medicine's Department of Dermatology to conduct an investigation of the human health effects from environmental exposures to arsenic, in collaboration with the Inner Mongolia Arsenic Program. The project is making use of previously collected data from local drinking water wells in three villages with known levels of arsenic in the water and is evaluating skin lesions of persons exposed at lower levels of arsenic. ATSDR provided technical assistance to researchers from Kazakhstan in making revisions to their protocol for an epidemiological study designed to examine the health of young children living near a former Soviet nuclear test site. ATSDR is developing a cooperative agreement with the Center for Substances and Risk Assessment at the National Institute of Public Health and the Environment in Bilthoven, Netherlands, to work collaboratively on assessing the health risks of various chemical mixtures.

Exchange of Information and Lessons Learned

ATSDR promotes the exchange of information and lessons learned with a number of other countries, academic researchers in other countries, and international organizations. Its Great Lakes Human Health Research Program has produced findings that have had an impact on both Canada and the United States. In connection with its Great Lakes Human Health Effects Research Program, ATSDR participates in several committees or organizations involving the United States and Canada, including the Human Health Subcommittee of the Lake Erie Lakewide Management Plan (LaMP), the Lake Superior LaMP Human Health Subcommittee, and the International Joint Commission. ATSDR assists WHO's International Programme on Chemical Safety in developing Concise International Chemical Assessment Documents (CICADs). CICADs, which provide summaries of the relevant scientific information concerning potential effects of specific chemicals upon human health and/or the environment, often rely on ATSDR's toxicological profiles as their primary data source. ATSDR developed the CICAD for manganese and is currently involved in the development of three additional CICADs – for mercury, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), and hydrogen sulfide.