

Forum looks at children's health

By ALLISON RUPP

Star-Tribune staff writer

The field of children's environmental health has changed significantly over the past 10 years, experts said Monday.

People better understand how environment -- mercury in fish, chemicals in plastics, pesticides -- affect infants and children and have better research on the effects of exposure to certain materials, according to Amy Kyle, of the environmental health sciences division of the University of California at Berkeley.

Kyle spoke to a group of about 25 people from the region at the Hilton Garden Inn during the 2008 Wyoming Children's Environmental Health Workshop. The event continues today.

During her interactive presentation, she asked members of the audience their favorite activities while a man said he liked to tickle them until they are red in the face.

Kyle said these were activities that exemplified "the delight and sense of wonderment" of a developing child.

"What has become clearer to us over the past 10 to 20 years is all of this is diminished by hazardous environments," Kyle said. "There isn't scientific debate around this anymore."

It is time to act on a local, state and national level, she said, to protect children from what people already know is unsafe.

The workshop was intended to help identify environmental health concerns for children and ways to prevent them, said Dr. Mark Anderson, a pediatrician from Denver.

Anderson and an organization he belongs to, the Pediatric Environmental Health Specialty Unit for the region, helped organize the event. The Wyoming Department of Health and Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality were also sponsors.

Environmental concerns affect children in different ways, Anderson said. For example, an adult who eats a lot of fish might not be in any harm, but a child who does could suffer consequences from mercury.

"Children cannot act on their own behalf," Kyle said. "They cannot change what's in their food, what's in their toys."

A few chemicals of concern include alcohol, lead, mercury, flame retardants, pesticides, cigarette smoke and some chemicals found in plastics, Kyle said. Hazards in the environment can cause developmental disabilities, cancer or reproductive problems later in life.

Even an unborn child is not protected by a mother's womb, Kyle said. Researchers have begun testing umbilical cords for chemical exposure, and more often than not, the test shows some form of exposure.

This was the most surprising statement for Lori Osman, a social worker at Casper-Natrona County Health Department.

She said public health nurses could learn to check homes they visit for hazardous chemicals and help parents dispose of them.

Individuals can remove dangerous chemicals from their home and push for schools to do the same, Kyle said. They can promote market solutions by not buying products that contain certain chemicals. Policy makers can create higher standards for air, water and pesticide safety and make them specific to children's different needs.

Timothy Ryan, environmental public health section chief for the health department, said this is the first conference in Wyoming, but he wants to make it an annual event.

"Some things are obvious hazards," Ryan said, "like a car passing by or an electrical outlet. We need to focus on the things that aren't so obvious."

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For more

The 2008 Wyoming Children's Environmental Health Workshop continues today. For steps to providing a safe home environment for your children, see Wednesday's Star-Tribune.

Casper Star Tribune
WEDNESDAY OCTOBER 1, 2008 p. 3

Officials outline ways to improve home environments

By ALLISON RUPP
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Health care providers and environmental agencies spent Tuesday morning learning what their clients may not know about their environment but could cause serious harm to children.

Michael Vogel, a professor at Montana State University, spoke about the dangers of untested well water and lead found in old paint during the second day of the 2008 Children's Environmental Health Workshop in Casper. He said these might be obvious to the Wyoming Department of Health and Department of Environmental Quality representatives, but the public might not realize the harm they can cause.

"You know this, but does the homeowner know this?" Vogel said when asking how far a water well should be from a septic tank.

Vogel and Dr. Mark Anderson, a pediatrician from Denver, gave tips the agencies could take back to their clients to make a home environment more safe for children.

Don't smoke indoors around children: Anderson said people shouldn't smoke, but if they choose to smoke they should protect children from it. Second-hand smoke can increase a child's risk of ear infections and breathing problems and can trigger asthma attacks.

Clean often: This keeps dust to a minimal amount and reduces the chemicals that come into the house from the outside, Vogel said. Cleaning is especially important with pets. Animal dander irritates some children and can trigger asthma attacks. Pets shouldn't be allowed in bedrooms.

Check your heating system: As winter approaches, people should check their heating systems, especially if they run on gas. They need to make sure the area around the heater is well ventilated and look for obstructions in ducts. The filter needs to be changed regularly. If you are not sure the heater is working properly or safe, heating companies can check it for a low cost.

Buy a carbon monoxide detector: Anderson recommends people buy a carbon monoxide detector, which costs between \$25 and \$45. Certain carbon monoxide levels are deadly. Vogel recommends a digital unit because it shows any level of carbon monoxide.

Maintain water wells and septic tanks: People must realize they are responsible for the testing and maintenance of their wells, Vogel said. They should test a well on an annual basis for bacteria and other chemicals and be aware treatment of well water may not protect from everything. If there is an infant living in the house, people should test for nitrate because it can cause blue-baby syndrome where babies turn blue because not enough oxygen is in their blood.

Test for lead: Lead poisoning can cause learning, behavioral or health issues in children and they are more likely to be exposed because they put things in their mouths and crawl on the floor. Many older homes are likely to have lead in the paint. New technology is making swab tests for the presence of lead more accurate, Vogel said. Children can also be tested through a blood sample. If lead is in the paint in the house, people shouldn't chip the paint away. They should paint over it several times to reduce the exposure.

Read labels on hazardous material: People should store hazardous materials such as cleaning supplies in their original containers out of the reach of children and pets. Children and fetuses are much more sensitive to hazardous materials than adults. These materials should be properly disposed of at a waste disposal site. Vogel said it's important to dispose of materials no longer used.

"You don't need 15 cleaning products to do two jobs," Vogel said.

For more information contact, the Environmental Protection Agency Office of Children's Health Protection at 1-877-590-KIDS, the Wyoming Department of Health at (307) 777-2931 or the Casper-Natrona County Health Department at (307) 577-9752

Casper NBC affiliate also ran a 2-minute story on the workshop on their 5 pm newscast on September 29, 2008.

The Children's Health piece is featured close to the middle of the newscast.
<http://www.nbcforwyoming.com/newscast.php?id=1513>