

Public health group announces launch of Canadian Environmental Health Atlas

By Eddy Ball

Joanne Telfer, project officer at Simon Fraser University, announced Sept. 13 the official launch of the [Canadian Environmental Health Atlas \(CEHA\)](http://www.ehatlas.ca/), (<http://www.ehatlas.ca/>) a project initiated in 2009 to advance knowledge about environmental health.

The ultimate aim of the atlas is to present a single comprehensive picture of environmental health in Canada that will bring together, in one document, traditional routes of exposure and the influence of human settlement on health. Spearheading the project was a [multidisciplinary team](http://www.ehatlas.ca/credits) (<http://www.ehatlas.ca/credits>) made up of a geographer, a demographer, and epidemiologists, including veteran NIEHS [grantee](http://projectreporter.nih.gov/project_info_description.cfm?aid=8462975&icde=17781171) (http://projectreporter.nih.gov/project_info_description.cfm?aid=8462975&icde=17781171) and Simon Fraser University professor [Bruce Lanphear, M.D.](http://cfri.ca/our-research/researchers/results/Details/302) (<http://cfri.ca/our-research/researchers/results/Details/302>)

As Lanphear explained in a talk at NIEHS in December 2012 (see [story](#)), CEHA is the first effort to synthesize Canadian research across a range of environmental health topics and make information accessible to a general audience. "Not enough people know that the environment is key [to public health]," he said, pointing to the lack of user-friendly sources of information about environmental public health.

An easily navigable source of information about environmental health

Originally envisioned as a conventional book format, the project quickly transitioned to an electronic resource that mixes short text passages with images linking to more detailed information. According to Lanphear, the team envisions the website working as a portal, or moderated wiki page, where new knowledge can be integrated into the atlas for easy access and translation for a general audience.

The project aims to promote disease prevention in three ways:

- Raising awareness of the many ways in which environmental influences affect human health.
- Highlighting the importance of environmental health in health promotion and disease prevention.
- Building a common vocabulary for interdisciplinary communication and collaboration in the broad domain of public health.

Users can easily access sections on major aspects of environmental health, ranging from air quality to social environments, specific diseases, disease categories, and toxicants. Additional links take users to key points about specific topics, as well as lists of resources and organizations, articles and publications, and news articles about environmental health. With its streamlined design and pull down menus, CEHA can appeal to audiences ranging from young students, who might feel intimidated by text-heavy pages, to people eager to learn as much as possible about a topic, and willing to read studies in scientific journals to get the information they want and need.

Next steps

Looking ahead, the team members said they realize the atlas is only scratching the surface of environmental health. They envision the project as a continually evolving effort, and foresee adding one or two sections to it each month. In the future, they hope to expand CEHA to become a world atlas, as the team works with additional experts to highlight other aspects of environmental health, as well as those experts' own research.

According to Lanphear, another objective of CEHA is to raise appreciation and awareness of environmental health's pioneers and leading advocates. "I think we underestimate the importance of environmental health experts, and our team would like to help remedy that," he said. "Why shouldn't we celebrate [Harvard researcher] Doug Dockery or [NIEHS Director] Linda Birnbaum, the way we do sports celebrities or musicians?"



Lanphear is a professor at the Child and Family Research Institute, and Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, British Columbia, who is an acknowledged authority on lead exposure and children's health. In 2012, he received the International Society for Environmental Epidemiology Research Integrity Award for his work promoting children's public health. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)

The CEHA home page reflects the site's overall design - short bursts of text, vivid images, and a wealth of navigational opportunities. The project team wanted the atlas to welcome readers of virtually every level, but also offer opportunities for more in-depth exploration of environmental public health topics.

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