National Environmental Health Association
Position on Environmental Justice

Background and General Discussion

Concerns that environmental health risks are borne disproportionately by different segments of society have recently gained national prominence (1-14). Some researchers have pointed to "environmental racism" as the cause of disparities in environmental risks (3,9,15-23). "Environmental justice," however, seeks to ensure that no population is forced to shoulder a disproportionate burden of the negative human health and environmental impacts of pollution or other environmental hazards (2,8,24,25) and focuses attention on the underlying principle that fairness and equality are inherent in society's efforts to protect the health of all citizens from the adverse effects of environmental agents (7). Environmental justice has become a top priority on the environmental health agenda of the United States (5-8,10,26).

Purpose

The purpose of this position paper is to review current information on the status of environmental justice with particular emphasis on the implications for environmental and public health. It is intended to be used as a basis for initiating discussions on the topic among environmental and public health practitioners and colleagues in related fields with policy makers at all levels—local, state, national, and world-wide.

Problem Statement

A wide variety of studies have suggested that economically disadvantaged communities, on average, experience higher exposures to many environmental agents than the general population (9,10,22,23,27-41); however, most of the studies are observational (1). Although the existing data are insufficient due to sparseness and limitations, the data suggest that environmental inequities do exist.

Data are available that indicate that minorities, the less educated, and those economically disadvantaged have higher mortality, higher rates of most chronic conditions, higher rates of disability, and their daily activity is more restricted (42-59). According to Sexton et al. (39), these same groups are also more likely to lack knowledge about environmental health issues, to have a substandard diet, to lack access to adequate health care, to smoke cigarettes and drink alcohol, and, in general, to have more stressful and less healthful lives (10,60-62). Moreover, recent studies indicate that the health status gap is growing wider (63-65). In a later article, Sexton (13) states "...poor people, and particularly poor blacks and Hispanics, are more likely than affluent whites to (1) live near sources of environmental pollution, such as waste sites; (2) reside in urban areas where
ambient levels of certain pollutants, such as lead, ozone, carbon monoxide, and particulate matter are elevated; (3) eat significantly greater amounts of contaminated fish; and (4) be employed in potentially dangerous occupations, such as migrant farm work."

**Recommended Action**

According to Sexton et al. (39), “An explicit goal of societal decisions should be ‘environmental health equity,’ a provision of adequate protection for all people, regardless of age, gender, health status, social class, or ethnicity/race.” In keeping with this, the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) recommends the following:

Undertaking detailed demographic and health studies geared toward understanding environmental risks faced by minority and low income communities.

Developing a productive dialogue between public health agencies and disadvantaged and minority communities about the design, implementation, and reporting of environmental health research.

Initiating projects to enhance risk communication targeted to minority and low-income population groups.

Ensuring that a racial, socioeconomic, or other appropriate dimension is overlaid on present and future geographical studies of environmental risk.

Obtaining input from appropriate research on environmental equity at decision making levels.

Present information on the public health implications of exposures to environmental contamination.

Begin to identify data gaps or problems associated with determining/evaluating health effects and disseminating such information.

Recognize the challenges of addressing the health concerns of minorities living and working near hazardous waste sites or other sources of environmental contamination.

Waste reduction programs mandated by federal, state, and local governments should set goals for recycling, composting, and using recycled materials.

The federal Environmental Protection Agency needs to take the lead in ensuring that all Americans are protected.

In order for risk reduction strategies to be effective in environmental high-impact areas and for vulnerable populations, there needs to be sweeping changes in key areas of the science model and environmental health research.
Identify environmental equity as a consideration for siting future potential pollution generators.

Identify environmental equity as a consideration in zoning and re-zoning of commercial and industrial property.

Finally, it must be noted that acceptance of the public as an active and equal partner in research and environmental decision making is a first step toward building trust within affected communities. In keeping with this, NEHA recommends the actions offered by Sidel et al. (14); specifically “Beyond exercising the right to vote, those living in at-risk communities can also act to reduce their risks. Such efforts include, but are not limited to: (1) working with existing environmental and other organizations, both inside and outside the community, and organizing new ones; (2) insisting that environmental decisions affecting communities be made in partnership with community residents; (3) demanding equity in environmental clean-up and enforcement of environmental regulations by government; (4) collaborating with local businesses to find acceptable alternatives to environmental risks; and (5) developing sustainable communities that do not require excess risk for economic well being. Attention should be paid to reducing the transfer of hazardous facilities to nations in which environmental regulation is weaker than in the United States.”

Method of Implementation

Upon adoption, the National Environmental Health Association should disseminate this paper as widely as possible by release to the membership, publication in the Journal of Environmental Health, and provision of copies of this paper to affiliates to share with their members, to researchers and schools of environmental and public health to utilize in their research decisions, and to similar professional associations for their review. Affiliates and members should be encouraged to provide comments to legislators based upon the information contained herein, or by providing a copy of this document as augmentation to comments provided.

References


64. Montgomery LE, Carter-Pokras O. Health status by social class and/or minority status: implications for environmental equity research. Toxicol Indus Health 1993;9:729-73.


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Fiscal Impact:

The committee foresees the only fiscal impact on NEHA with the adoption of this paper to be the cost of making and mailing copies. The fiscal impact of the problem will be felt mainly by communities and individuals currently experiencing a disproportionate burden of negative human health and environmental impacts of pollution.

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