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WORLD CONFERENCE CALLS ON GOVERNMENTS AND HEALTH ORGANIZATIONS TO TACKLE CANCER RISKS

Delegates at the 2002 World Conference on Breast Cancer in Victoria, B.C. called on governments throughout the world to take action on environmental links to breast cancer and ensure women have access to the knowledge and health care they need to fight the disease.

"Delegates made it very plain they want more collaboration and support between governments and organizations and an elimination of political and competitive barriers that have no place in addressing breast cancer," says Laurene Clark, president of the World Conference on Breast Cancer. "The delegates want a concerted effort by governments to provide women with education to build awareness of risk factors and awareness of breast health factors and to be aware of the needs of disadvantaged women."

Delegates called on governments to apply the "Precautionary Principle" when dealing with any activity that raises a threat of harm to human and environmental health. This principle calls for implementation of precautionary measures even if science has yet to establish absolute links between the activity and breast cancer. Proponents of the principle say cancer can potentially be prevented by reducing risk factors and eliminating exposure to carcinogenic substances, including environmental toxins in air, soil, water and food supply.

Some of those environmental toxins may affect hormone levels in women. There's increasing evidence of a link between elevated life-long hormone levels and breast cancer. Clark asked delegates to expand their concept of "environment" when wrestling with the hormone question. "There's the external environment, such as our atmosphere, that we have little direct control over. There's the external environment that we can affect by the choices we make including diet and exercise, and there's the internal environment, our biological environment or the factors that influence it—and that's the one we know the least about."

Delegates also recommended that conference proceedings be distributed to cancer agencies, health bodies and the UN committee on health and environment. "Before the next world conference, we should strive to provide opportunities in the different

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countries of the world for people to bring their ideas forward and stimulate grass roots initiatives," adds Clark.

Throughout the conference, which wraps up today, delegates heard emotional stories from women who waited years for proper diagnoses, were denied access to basic treatment such as radiation and chemotherapy, and given little or no opportunity to participate in their care.

"No woman should be denied breast health and cancer care because of a lack of means, because of a lack of education, because of cultural or religious beliefs, because of a lack of available medical services or a lack of education for medical providers, or because of a discriminatory health policy," says Clark. "No woman should be denied breast health or cancer care because she is a woman."

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