

# AN OUNCE OF PREVENTION

## Women's Health & The Environment

### WHO:

**Dr Devra Lee Davis,**

Senior Fellow, Health and Environment, World  
Resources Institute, Washington, DC

**Dr Ana Soto,**

Department of Anatomy and Cellular Biology, Tufts  
University, Boston

**Sharon Batt,**

Author of *Patient No More* & Co-Founder of  
Breast Cancer Action Montreal

### WHAT:

A public education forum about the impact of toxic chemicals on women's health: how chemicals affect us, how we can reduce our exposure and how we can work for their elimination from our environment.

### WHY:

Because an ounce of prevention is worth more than throwing \$1 trillion at an elusive cure.

# Women in Their Environment

## Vancouver Women's Health Collective

The Vancouver Women's Health Collective (VWHC) has been working for the last 25 years to help women better understand the various intertwining environments we find ourselves experiencing. Most of our work has started with women asking questions that no one could or wanted to answer.

In 1971, the basic frustration with the health care they were receiving launched a group of women to question the medicalization of our most immediate environment, our bodies. Why are women's natural functions medical problems? Why is our experience of these functions denied or ignored? How can women take the power and responsibility for their health care back into their own hands?

Answering these questions has led us to examine the interrelationship between the immediate environment of our bodies with that of ; the ever-changing political environments that determines who gets access to what; the multinational corporate environment that controls what drugs and medicines are researched and distributed; the social environment which fosters racism, sexism, classism and heterosexism as a means of control; the economic environment we find ourselves in and the interpersonal environment which is shaped by all of the above factors to reflect who we are and how we relate in the world. And that was just the first meeting of the collective!

Twenty five years later we have some answers and many more questions. The ongoing work of trying to create change in this intricate environmental web has again led us to examine the role of our physical environments in affecting our health. Last year we were asked how environmental toxins affect the development of breast cancer and what could individuals do about it. We had no answers. Tonight is a first step to getting some answers to both of these questions.

In 1971 Melanie Cohn's question in a local women's paper - *are you as frustrated as me with the health care you are receiving?* has led to a legacy of action through education, advocacy, information referral, publication and lobbying for political change and corporate responsibility. Tonight we put the question to you - **are you willing to let this piece of the breast cancer puzzle remain unexamined and unaddressed?** We didn't think so. A next step could be signing up for one of the action/strategy meetings April 15th or April 18th 7-9pm at the Suite 219-1675 West 8th Ave. where we as a community will begin the work of getting our questions answered and making changes.

**WHAT'S A NICE ENVIRONMENTALIST DOING,  
WORKING ON AN ISSUE LIKE THIS?**  
**Miranda Holmes, Toxics Campaigner, Georgia Strait Alliance**

Georgia Strait Alliance is a coalition of diverse groups and individuals who joined together in 1990 to tackle the many problems impacting on the marine ecosystems of Georgia Strait and its adjoining waters. The organization tackles numerous environmental issues, including protection of marine habitat, oil spill prevention, growth and development and protection of urban salmon streams.

Although it is headquartered in Nanaimo, GSA also has a Vancouver toxics campaign office. The initial focus of the work I did in that office was industrial and sewage pollution and their impact on marine life.

We began to concentrate more attention on human health issues following the September 1994 release of the US Environmental Protection Agency's 1994 **Dioxin Reassessment**, which revealed that dioxins (probably the most toxic chemical ever created by man) were far more dangerous than previously supposed and could, among other terrifying things, cross the placenta and begin to damage the unborn child. Dioxins, it is important to remember, are simply the most researched of thousands of chemicals which can interfere with hormones.

In January 1995 I attended a forum in Seattle, **Poisons In The Web of Life**. One of the speakers was Judy Brady, a San Francisco breast cancer activist. Her speech inspired me to push for a change in the direction of GSA's toxics campaign. When Judy said, "The reason having a child reduces your risk of developing breast cancer, is because the only way you can expel the toxics which have collected in breast tissue is to pass them on to your child through lactation," my jaw dropped open and stayed that way for quite a while.

At the request of the Vancouver Women's Health Collective I participated as a panelist at the May 1995 **Healthy Breasts: Women Taking Action** forum. I saw this as a wonderful opportunity to draw attention to the links between cancer and environmental contaminants -- and with Judy Brady's help, I managed to write a pretty good speech.

At a follow-up meeting at the Collective, we discussed holding another forum, focusing exclusively on women's health and the environment. I phoned Judy to ask who she would suggest as speakers. Without hesitation, she recommended Devra Lee Davis, Ana Soto and Sharon Batt.

And here we are.

When I was trying to think of a name for this forum, '**An Ounce of Prevention**' sprang immediately to mind, because an ounce or a gram of prevention really is worth more than continuing to throw trillions of dollars at a cure which may never be found. I hope this forum is just a beginning, that the outcome will be an alliance of environmental, women's groups, health care advocates and everyone else who cares about the future working together to get these killer chemicals out of our environment and ourselves.

# *Program for the Evening*

*7:00 - 7:05*

*Introduction*

*7:05 - 7:30*

*Dr. Devra Lee Davis*

*7:30 - 7:55*

*Dr. Ana Soto*

*7:55 - 8:05*

*Break*

*8:05 - 8:30*

*Sharon Batt*

*8:30 - 9:25*

*Discussion & Questions From the Floor*

*9:25*

*Closing*

Program credits:

Cover design: Rowan Shaw

Special thanks to: Joe Rea, Eilis Gallagher, Sue Diederichs, Karen Hudson, Judy Brady, Wendy Masui, Cindy Randall, Olga Mestrovic, Lu Hansen, Vancouver Women's Bookstore

Big Thanks to our sponsor:

