

STATEMENT OF  
SENATOR KENNEDY  
HEARING ON  
THE DEVELOPMENT OF A NATIONAL HEALTH TRACKING SYSTEM  
MARCH 6, 2002

I am pleased that the Committee is considering the critical issue of tracking environmental exposures and chronic diseases, and I want to commend Senator Clinton and Senator Reid for their leadership on this issue.

Science has made great strides in developing treatments for diseases and conditions that attack the human body. At one time, many of these diseases were a death sentence. Now, treatments and cures exist to promote and protect the public health. Our understanding of genetics grows each day, and is crucial to our fight against diseases including lung and breast cancer, as well as neurological and reproductive problems. The mapping of the human genome represents a giant step in the progress of science, giving hope to millions of people around the world.

Yet, our ability to use this knowledge to prevent disease will not be able to reach its full potential if we do not understand what the triggers are that link genes to disease. There is a growing body of scientific evidence that exposure to chemicals such as mercury, lead, and pesticides may be linked to chronic disease. We must have the data necessary to understand the possible connection between environmental conditions and chronic disease. As the Pew Environmental Health Commission reported, our nation does not have the public health infrastructure to combine the knowledge gained in the laboratory with practical data from the field.

In order to translate scientific research into useful chronic disease prevention strategies, we need to develop a system to track environmental exposures and chronic disease. Disease registries are key tools for epidemiologists to follow incidence of chronic diseases. A number of states already have registries in place for diseases such as cancer and asthma. If we can link this data with information on environmental exposure, we may be able to understand what triggers a particular disease, and usher in a new era of public health promotion and prevention.

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The establishment of a national health tracking network will require years of detailed planning and hard work. I am pleased that \$17.5 million was allocated to the CDC in fiscal year 2002 for this effort. This is a down payment for the work that needs to happen - we must develop data collection and analysis standards among states, train new professionals in this field, and improve collaboration between state environment and health departments.

I applaud the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, and the National Institutes of Health for their dedication to this issue. Its importance cannot be overlooked. Chronic diseases affect over 100 million people in our nation. That's more than 33 percent of the population. Asthma-related deaths of children have skyrocketed 78 percent between 1980 and 1993. Researchers are limited by a lack of substantive data. This work must begin now for the data to be available for future scientific efforts, and I look forward to working with my colleagues on legislation to address this important issue.