

# 2,000 learn about prevention, awareness at women's environmental health conference

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When 73-year-old Joan Hinnebusch first learned she had breast cancer 17 years ago, it was the beginning of what would be an ongoing battle with the disease. After surviving ovarian cancer and another diagnosis of breast cancer one year ago, Hinnebusch was one of more than 2,000 people gathered at this year's Women's Health and The Environment Conference at the David L. Lawrence Convention Center in Pittsburgh.

Like Hinnebusch, Heinz Endowments Chairperson Teresa Heinz was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2009. For Heinz, it was the beginning of a journey that ended with the realization that she owed it to herself to pay attention to her body and health. She spoke openly about her battle with the disease, urging those in the audience to take enough time in their busy lives to focus on their health.

"There are things in life you can control. [...] You can control outcomes by being smart -- and that's what I was not. I was not smart about myself," said Heinz.

Heinz said she met a woman at the conference whose mother died of breast cancer because she couldn't afford a mammogram.

"I think the hardest [thing] is for someone who doesn't have anything. And generally speaking, by the time they know anything, it's too late," said Heinz.

This year's Women's Health and The Environment Conference, a free conference sponsored by Teresa Heinz, The Heinz Endowments and Magee-Womens Hospital of UPMC, focused on new science and new solutions, with panel discussions from top doctors and scientists, including U.S. Surgeon General Regina Benjamin and Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Lisa P. Jackson.

Since first learning about her diagnosis, Hinnebusch has become more astute about environmental factors that cause health problems.

"I think that how they shoot up animals with all this fake stuff to make them fat, and that using Styrofoam cups, is bad. I think that all the produce you eat should be organic, and you should stay away from red meat," said Hinnebusch.

Hinnebusch learned about the conference from her friends at the Gilda's Club of Western Pennsylvania, a support group for cancer patients and their family and friends.

Experts talked about disease prevention pertaining to awareness of dangerous chemicals in everyday things, including food, cosmetics, cleaners, toys and cups.

Jeanne Rizzo, founding partner of the Campaign for Safe Cosmetics and a speaker at the conference, explained the importance of being educated about the chemicals in your house.

“Be an informed patient. Be an activist,” Rizzo said. “Our government needs to regulate [toxic chemicals]. Our industry needs to make a commitment. But it’s up to us to apply the pressure – and I think we can all do it.”

Rizzo said that both the Environmental Protection Agency and the Food and Drug Administration regulate the use of toxic chemicals, including bisphenol A (BPA), used in plastic items such as baby bottles and cups. An FDA report from earlier this year raised concerns regarding the exposure of the chemical to fetuses, infants and young children.

Speakers Rick Smith and Bruce Lourie, authors of “Slow Death by Rubber Duck: the Secret Danger of Everyday Things” explained their own experiment in which they completed everyday tasks with products in which chemicals such as BPA are present. For example, Smith drank out of his son’s baby bottle for two days. His BPA levels at the end of the period were seven and a half times his original levels.

“I’m a six-foot-six guy. I only did this for two days. You can only imagine what the levels of BPA in my infant son would look like after his sole source of nutrition for two and a half years was a BPA baby bottle into which was poured a formula from a can lined with BPA,” said Smith.

While the cautionary tale of the conference drove much of the research, another theme also emerged: the importance of community and individual commitment to health. Dr. Benjamin described her years of medical practice in Bayou La Batre, Alabama, a rural community in which she worked with patients struggling just to break even.

Dr. Benjamin told the audience about a patient she had in Alabama years ago who could not afford her pain medication. When Benjamin gave it to her anyway, she realized that she had embarrassed her patient.

“I realized at that moment that I had taken her dignity from her,” said the Surgeon General.

The patient then asked Benjamin for a work excuse, but wanted to return to her job right away to clean the local elementary school for the children of the community.

“Here is a woman who is unable to sit down because she’s in so much pain, but she’s willing to go and strip the wax off the floors so our kids can go to school in a clean environment,” said Benjamin. “I [had] to wonder, what kind of things is she exposed to when she’s scrubbing those floors? And what kind of things are our kids being exposed to?”

Benjamin said that people like her patient illustrate that community health is just as important as individual health.

“If we want to be healthy as individuals, we’ve got to have healthy communities as well,” said Benjamin.

For those in attendance, like Hinnebusch, the conference represented one way to take control of individual health as well as co-create a healthy community, dedicated to education and support.