



# HEALTHIER HUMANS, HEALTHIER PLANET: 20 YEARS OF CHE

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Some people identify as clinicians, some as environmentalists, some as scientists, some as people affected by diseases thought to be at least partly related to environmental factors such as industrial or other chemicals, and some who are any combination of these identities. Twenty years ago, some of us decided that all these diverse people might benefit from talking with each other more—and by working for a healthier future as well. And so in 2002 we convened a group of leaders in all these fields at the San Francisco Medical Society to plan what might be most useful.

That inaugural meeting led to the creation of the Collaborative on Health and the Environment (CHE), which we formally launched at a large conference at UCSF medical center co-chaired by the late great former UCSF Chancellor Philip R. Lee, MD.

CHE was focused on two fundamental questions: 1) Given the increasing prevalence of chronic diseases and disabilities, what do we know from the science about the role of environmental exposures? and 2) How can we make the emerging environmental health science more accessible to researchers, health professionals, health-affected groups, and the general public in order to press for upstream prevention of these major health concerns? It seemed to us that the more people who are experiencing health problems understood the environmental exposures and diseases, from conception to senior ages, then the groundswell of demand for cleaner air and water, healthier foods, safer products, and healthier homes, schools and workplaces would be immeasurably strengthened. In turn, not only would we have a healthier planet, but we would be healthier, too.

Many seemed to agree. At our first open meetings, most attendees eagerly signed on to our consensus statement. Once our website was up and we began presenting the concise webinars with leading researchers and other figures that have remained our organic bread and butter, that spiraled into the thousands. CHE became a kind of open university of “science and civility”—which soon became our guiding motto.

## Promoting Prevention

CHE has fostered numerous interdisciplinary collaborations that have advanced disease prevention and health promotion, including these:

- Establishing, with a major international conference, the **first major academic program in the United States on reproductive health and the environment** (housed at the University of California, San Francisco – UCSF).
- Creating an **award-winning eBook on multiple contributors to specific health concerns** with continuing education credits for health professionals available from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
- Engaging **the President’s Cancer Panel** in the first major review of the scientific literature on links between **toxic exposures and cancer**.
- Educating **national learning and developmental disabilities organizations** about the emerging science and empowering them to become **influential voices in reducing exposures to toxic chemicals** through chemical policy reform initiatives and market campaigns.
- Producing **more than 60 publications**, for researchers, health professionals, and lay constituencies to better understand new research and how it can be applied in “real world” ways.
- Developing **scientific consensus statements** that have advanced research on environmental links to a wide range of diseases and disabilities.
- Founding **Because Health**, a consumer-oriented resource for anyone wishing to live an informed, healthier life in an often toxic environment.
- And, from the beginning, presenting hundreds of open **educational calls and webinars** on the full range of environmental health science, policies, and other developments.



We now embark on a new era for CHE, with an excellent new director, Kristin Schafer. Through the years CHE has had well over a dozen great staff, expert advisors, scores of leading scientists and others lending their brains and voices to our forums; some generous funders who've made it all possible; and again, thousands of CHE partners who have come along with us.

Legendary biologist Rachel Carson's landmark 1962 book *Silent Spring* focused on the impact of pesticides and other chemicals on birds and other species, helping launch a modernization of environmentalism. But humans are hardly immune to such impacts as well. When CHE began, we figured giving the new effort a five-year "trial incubation" period might be a smart approach to start, and that if it thrived, it might be spun off of Commonwealth to become its own independent entity. Two decades later, CHE is an effort with wide impact. One could say, for better and worse, it is needed even more than two decades ago.

This special section presents brief reflections from some of CHE's founding and other loyal leaders, from leading figures in the field to students CHE has nurtured, and concluding with our new Executive Director. We are proud of this onetime "startup" and know it will continue to make significant contributions to the broad field of environmental human health.-||



*Steve Heilig is with the SFMMS and Commonwealth.*



*Michael Lerner is the President of Commonwealth. They were among the small group of CHE co-founders and are still actively involved.*

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