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1. TESTIMONY January 24, 1995 JAMES A. MERCHANT DIRECTOR, DEPARTMENT OF PREVENTIVE MEDICINE AND ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH UNIVERSITY OF IOWA HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS LABOR, HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES, AND EDUCATION FY96 LABOR-HHS APPROPRIATIONS

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January 24, 1995, Tuesday

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Body

TESTIMONY

OF

JAMES A. MERCHANT, M.D., Dr. PH.

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Health

University of Iowa

President, AUEHSC

ON BEHALF OF

ASSOCIATION OF UNIVERSITY ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

SCIENCES CENTERS (AUEHSC)

Before the

SUBCOMMITTEE ON LABOR-HHS-EDUCATION APPROPRIATIONS

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

January 27, 1995

TESTIMONY January 24, 1995 JAMES A. MERCHANT DIRECTOR, DEPARTMENT OF PREVENTIVE
MEDICINE AND ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH UNIVERSITY OF IOWA HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS LABOR,

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Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, ladies and gentlemen. I want to thank you for giving me this opportunity to testify on behalf of appropriations for the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences and especially for the **NIEHS** supported Environmental Health Sciences Centers Program. My name is Jim Merchant and I am the Director of the Environmental Health Sciences Research Center at The University of Iowa and the President of the Association of University Environmental Health Sciences Centers.

The mission of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences is science-based disease prevention. Likewise, the major goal of the environmental health sciences center is research and community outreach aimed at disease prevention - especially for women, children and minorities who are most vulnerable to many environmental exposures. In fact, I think it is safe to say that **NIEHS** is the prevention institute. While **NIEHS** focuses on prevention, and is still one of the smallest NIH institutes, it has world class scientists. **NIEHS** scientists helped clone the Breast Cancer Susceptibility Gene and Martin Rodbell, 1994 Nobel Laureate in Physiology, did much of his research at **NIEHS**.

The Association of University Environmental Health Centers represents 22 university-based environmental health science and marine research centers, and three developmental centers. They are located all across the United States. In the 20 years of their existence, these centers have contributed substantially to the prevention of environmentally related diseases in the United States and abroad. Research conducted in our centers has provided fundamental knowledge and strategies for preventing childhood lead poisoning, asbestosis, and environmentally-related asthma and cancer. The savings in human suffering and medical care costs that have resulted from this research have been enormous.

Let me site a few specific examples of how the work of the environmental health science centers sponsored by **NIEHS** has prevented disease.

(1) Lead poisoning is epidemic among young children in the United States. It affects children of all races and ethnic groups, but it is especially prevalent among minority children in our cities. It is estimated that at least 3 million children have elevated blood lead levels. Research conducted by the Environmental Health Science Centers at Harvard University and the University of Cincinnati demonstrated that even low level lead exposure resulted in adverse health effects -- this has led to increased prevention efforts so that today fewer American children suffer the debilitating effects of lead poisoning.

(2) Asbestos contaminated hundreds of thousands of homes, schools, public buildings, and factories exposing tens of millions of people from the 1930's until the 1980's. In fact by the year 2000, an estimated 300,000 Americans will have died of diseases caused by asbestos. Research conducted at the Environmental Health Sciences Centers at Mt. Sinai in New York and Johns Hopkins University made possible the development of preventive strategies that are in place today. Had the **NIEHS** Environmental Health Sciences Centers not existed, I think it's fair to say that the current epidemic could well have been far worse, asbestos would still be more widely used, and the death toll from asbestos induced lung fibrosis and cancer would likely extend even farther into the next century.

(3) Air pollution from power plants and automobiles puts millions of Americans at increased risk to environmental asthma and chronic bronchitis. **NIEHS** centers at Harvard and New York University provided the comprehensive scientific basis for air pollution control. This research has identified the most hazardous components of air pollution and has led to significantly improved control technologies.

(4) Mr. Chairman, The University of Iowa Center has studies now underway that will assess the extent of the risk posed by radon to Iowa residents - a state where over 70% of the homes exceed the current recommended health advisory level. The research we are conducting on non-smoking women, together with detailed assessments of radon levels over many years, will provide us all with more precise guidelines as to the true health risk associated with radon.

(5) Recent research undertaken by the Mt. Sinai Center and the New York University Environmental Health Sciences Center has provided evidence for the possible association between DDT and female breast cancer. DDT

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is one of several environmental toxicants that mimic the female hormone estrogen and could well play a role in hormone-related cancers like breast cancer. It is extremely important if we can show that at least some cases of breast cancer may be prevented by reducing certain environmental exposures. You will recall that it was recently announced that research supported by the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences had resulted in the cloning of a breast cancer susceptibility gene called BRCA1. This is a major breakthrough in the nation's breast cancer research effort to develop a diagnostic test that would prevent many unnecessary breast cancer deaths.

These are but a few examples of the important biomedical research conducted by **NIEHS** and its national network of Environmental Health Sciences Centers. These centers also provide a critically important national resource in the face of environmental disasters. In the great midwestern flood of 1993, our Iowa center provided extensive consultation and technical assistance to FEMA, state agencies and relief organizations about environmental contamination resulting from flooding. Technical assistance documents on control of flood-related environmental hazards have recently been sent to the states of Georgia, Texas and California. I want to also note, Mr. Chairman, that in the last few years the **NIEHS** Centers have redoubled their efforts to work with and educate local communities on matters of environmental health. That the **NIEHS** Centers have done this in a time of shrinking budgets gives testimony to the larger mission they are fulfilling for the nation.

Mr Chairman, I know you understand and have appreciation for the health hazards caused by environmental exposures. We all want to prevent environmental diseases, but at the same time our strategies must be based on the best possible science and risk assessments. Without the very best science we risk not providing enough protection, or conversely, the risk of unnecessary public concern and public expense. This is a key reason why the research conducted at **NIEHS** Centers is so important to our nation's health. Sound scientific data allows sound public policy.

Finally, Mr Chairman, I want to thank you for your personal support of the recently announced international training and research initiative in environmental and occupational health. This new initiative led by the Fogarty International Center, in collaboration with **NIEHS** and NIOSH, will help develop badly needed environmental health training and collaborative research in many heavily polluted countries, such as those in Eastern Europe, the site of some of the world's worst environmental contamination.

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