

### State's children deserve health excellence centers

Network would diagnose diseases of environmental origin, provide outreach  
By Philip J. Landrigan, Commentary  
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Asthma, autism, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, birth defects, obesity, diabetes and cancer as well as injuries and violence are the major diseases of children in New York. Asthma has tripled in the past 30 years and affects 250,000 of New York's children. ADHD, dyslexia and other learning disabilities affect one child in six, and autism afflicts one child in 88. Childhood obesity has nearly quadrupled, and Type 2 diabetes is epidemic. Pediatric cancer has increased by 40 percent.

We know that harmful exposures in the environment are responsible for many of these diseases. The World Health Organization finds that environmental exposures are linked to 35 percent of all disease and deaths in children worldwide.

Toxic chemicals are causes of pediatric disease. Children today are at risk of exposure to more than 85,000 synthetic chemicals widespread in children's environments. Many have not been tested.

A landmark report released this month by pediatric researchers in the Mount Sinai Health System presents authoritative information on the environmental health of New York's 4.3 million children.

The report, "New York's Children and the Environment," confirms diseases of environmental origin are common. It finds these diseases cost \$4.35 billion each year — costs that fall on the families of sick children and inflate the Medicaid and special education budgets. It reports fewer than 20 percent of New York's pediatricians have been trained to suspect the environment as a cause of disease.

The report calls on elected officials to establish a network of Centers of Excellence in Children's Environmental Health Centers to span the Empire State. Each center would support a team of pediatricians, nurses, social workers and educators, and would diagnose, treat and prevent disease of environmental origin and provide educational outreach. They would reduce health care costs and help the state's Medicaid budget.

The report calls for passage of legislation that would establish the statewide network and secure its funding. This legislation (A7885) was introduced by Assemblyman Robert K. Sweeney of Long Island and is co-sponsored by 12 other members. It is time for legislators to take up and pass this legislation and for Gov. Andrew Cuomo to sign it into law. New York's children deserve no less.

*Dr. Philip J. Landrigan is head of the Children's Environmental Health Center at the Mount Sinai Health System.*

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