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October 10, 2002



# HOME NEWS TRIBUNE

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## Shore Report

## Autism conference aims at environment

Published in the Home News Tribune 10/04/02

By APARNA NARAYANAN  
HEALTH WRITER

NEW BRUNSWICK: A quest to understand the interaction between autism genes and the environment brought scientists, parents and activists from the state and nation to the Hyatt Regency New Brunswick on Albany Street yesterday. The two-day conference concludes today.

Environmental triggers, rather than genetic factors, are easier to manipulate, and understanding them can help to formulate public-health intervention strategies, Kenneth Olden, director of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, told the audience.

"It's hard to do gene therapy, we haven't succeeded yet in humans," he said, "but we can reduce exposure to environmental factors easily."

Autism is a disability that affects normal development and results in difficulties with behavior, social interaction and communication. It is increasing at "an alarming rate," occurring in one in 700 births and affecting five boys to every girl, said Joseph Seneca, vice president for academic affairs at Rutgers University, who attended the conference.

The autism conference aims to pool the expertise of environment and autism specialists "to increase our ability to monitor and understand the effects of environmental chemicals on child development, especially on children at highest risk," said George Lambert, director of the Center for Childhood Neurotoxicology and Exposure Assessment in Piscataway.

The conference includes lectures on topics such as childhood exposure to environmental toxicants and the neurobiology of autism, panel discussions, a parent and scientist open forum and question-and-answer sessions.

The neurotoxicology center was established in November 2001 with five-year, \$5 million grants from the National Institutes of Health and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Researchers at the center are investigating how exposure to environmental toxins influences the neurological health and development of children.

Autism and related disorders are the center's focus, according to Lambert.

The center's basic research, for example on brain development, is complemented by research that takes scientists to the homes of some autistic children.



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"We try to see whether or not there are chemical or other agents in the environment" that cause autism in children, said Paul Lioy, associate director of the center.

Scientists test the homes of these autistic children for possible neurotoxins and map the environment around their homes to understand whether and how neurotoxins, such as lead and pesticides, affect brain function and growth, he added.

Danielle Martino, a resident of Trenton who attended the conference, said she hopes such scientific efforts will help explain the causes of her 5-year-old son's autism.

"Can (the experts) tell me what exactly is it?" she asked. "I had to come in, I had to hear what they had to say. I live with it every day."

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*The conference begins at 8:00 a.m. today and ends at noon. Additional information is available at [www.eohsi.rutgers.edu/childhood/autism/](http://www.eohsi.rutgers.edu/childhood/autism/)*

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