

## **Surgeon General: IAQ Warrants Federal Action**

By Steve Sauer

([https://www.ieconnections.com/archive/feb\\_05/feb\\_05.htm#article2](https://www.ieconnections.com/archive/feb_05/feb_05.htm#article2))

The U.S. Surgeon General, addressing a crowd of about 500 stakeholders representing many areas of health related to all aspects of indoor environments, indicated last month that he agrees more should be done at the federal level to communicate to the public the health hazards posed by poor indoor air quality.

Open discussions among organizers, speakers and attendees of the Surgeon General's Workshop on Healthy Indoor Environment focused on a number of areas, including ways the federal government could make citizens more aware of health issues related to indoor air quality. Research initiatives and interagency collaboration were among the most popular methods discussed.

The workshop, held Jan. 12–13 on the campus of the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Md., focused mainly on indoor air quality but also touched on other ergonomics issues related to indoor spaces, such as the effects of light on student or worker performance in school and office settings.

Organizers of the workshop are preparing a report for Vice Admiral Richard H. Carmona, who has served as surgeon general since 2002. The report is to propose a plan of action for the federal government.

During the meeting, Carmona issued a national health advisory on radon, emphasizing to citizens the serious health risk of radon in homes. The colorless, odorless gas kills more than 20,000 Americans in their homes every year, he said, adding that radon test kits should be used at least once every two years or after every move.

As for the overall issue of indoor air quality, Carmona discouraged the idea of issuing an official Surgeon General's report on the topic due to the duration of preparation time and high costs involved. He said such reports generally take two to three years and require millions of dollars.

However, he said he will support a more immediate approach that would take only months instead of years to prepare and incur less costs. Described this alternative as involving a group of experts, he expressed confidence in members of his staff and other people who were involved in the workshop and hinted they would be among those involved.

Researchers speaking at the workshop included researchers Dr. Jack Spengler of Harvard University's School of Public Health, Dr. Thomas A.E. Platts-Mills of the University of Virginia Health System, Dr. Clifford S. Mitchell of Johns Hopkins University's Bloomberg School of Public Health and Dr. Eileen Storey of the University of Connecticut's Center for Indoor Environments and Health. Platts-Mills' presentation also included information from Dr. Michael Hodgson of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, who also attended the workshop.

Rear Admiral Robert C. Williams, chief engineer of the U.S. Public Health Service, attended the entire two-day workshop and seemed to be taking notes for Carmona while the surgeon general was absent from the workshop to attend meetings at the White House and other locations.

Carmona was there, however, to hear calls from attendees Hal Levin and James Woods to make indoor air quality an issue of national priority and to respond to it via a multidisciplinary effort.

Several attendees did notice certain professions largely missing from the invited speakers and also poorly represented in the audience: indoor air quality professionals, members of the cleaning industry, and building scientists.

One presentation, by Dr. Jonathan Samet of Johns Hopkins University, listed nine organizations that deal with health issues including asthma in particular, facility management, or indoor air quality. While Samet named the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology, the American Society of Heating, Refrigeration and Air-Conditioning Engineers, the Building Owners and Managers Association, and some governmental organizations, his list was seen in the audience as incomplete.

Green cleaning expert Stephen Ashkin, who introduced himself at an aisle microphone during audience participation sessions, noted that Samet's list failed to incorporate trade organizations such as the U.S. Green Building Council. In response, Samet referenced a disclaimer he had made during the presentation that he knew he could not include every relevant organization.

"The data clearly indicates the need for this workshop," Carmona stated at the workshop's opening, delivering prepared remarks. "In just the past 25 years, the percentage of health evaluations that the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health at the CDC has conducted related to indoor-air quality has increased from 0.5 percent of all evaluations in 1978, to 52 percent of all evaluations since 1990. This means that in those years, the evaluations related to air quality concerns have increased from one of every 200 evaluations to one of every two."

Outlining three goals for the workshop, he said the most important was to "build collaborations around the common goal of improving our indoor environments."

Offices of the federal government were well represented at the workshop, with eight major government bodies offering officials for presentations and a panel discussion.

While the speakers at the panel discussion representing the eight government bodies were quick to agree that collaboration among them must occur, some attendees noted in side discussions afterward that collaboration actually seems to be a long time away. No one speaker seemed to want to "step up to the plate" and initiate a collaborative agreement, they said.

Some attendees also bemoaned the notable omission of the U.S. Department of Education at the forum. Several of the presentations dealt strongly with the issue of healthy indoor environments in schools, which gave credence to such complaints as Claire Barnett's.

Barnett, executive director of the Healthy Schools Network, distributed fact sheets derived from a 2004 position statement by the Coalition for Healthier Schools, signed by dozens of organizations across the country.

Each double-sided sheet contains a written reminder of a provision in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 that requires the Department of Education to

complete “a study regarding the health and learning impacts of environmentally unhealthy public school buildings on students and teachers.”

The act, which President Bush signed into law Jan. 8, 2002, required that the study “be completed not later than 18 months after the date of enactment.” Barnett said that an April 2004 study prepared for the department does not adequately fulfill all requirements of the legislation.

Dr. Marion J. Balsam, who works in the National Institutes of Health, said she was shocked that the department was not represented at the workshop at all. However, she indicated hope for the status of a nationwide research study affecting schools.

Balsam, who acts as program director for NIH research partnerships, said a project called the National Children’s Study will include a major focus on indoor air quality initiatives that would begin to solve a number of problems inside schools around the country. The study was authorized by the Children’s Health Act of 2000 and is sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, and the EPA. It is also being planned and conducted by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. More information on this study can be obtained on the Web at [www.nationalchildrensstudy.gov](http://www.nationalchildrensstudy.gov).

Making himself heard during several audience participation periods was Joel Segal, the legislative assistant responsible for writing the U.S. Toxic Mold Safety and Protection Act that Rep. John Conyers, D-Mich., brought before Congress, earning eventual support from Senate members Frank Lautenberg, Hillary Clinton, Jim Jeffords and Ted Kennedy.

Segal’s first question was directed toward Noreen Clark and Peyton Eggleston, members of the committee that last year issued a report for the Institute of Medicine on damp indoor spaces and health. Segal remarked that because a nationwide toll-free phone number for mold victims to call is linked to Conyers’ office, he has seen discrepancies between science and the numerous calls he fields on a regular basis.

“I just returned from a town hall meeting in Boston where I heard from one person after another who all say toxic mold has ruined their lives,” he said. “And when I get back to my office on Friday, I’m going to hear from a family of five in Wyoming telling me the same thing.”

Further attesting to such phenomena was Sharon Kramer, a California woman who says her daughter went into “code blue respiratory distress” only two weeks after qualifying for a school volleyball team. Kramer said she blames her daughter’s illness on overexposure to a species of *Aspergillus*. Since her experience with mold, she has read up on existing fungal research and formed her own Web site, [MDawareness.com](http://MDawareness.com), dedicated to promoting awareness of mycotic diseases.

Her site led the effort to bring the issue of mold before Congress last summer, culminating in a press conference and congressional briefing that brought human rights activist Bianca Jagger to Washington, D.C.

At the workshop, Kramer accused those speakers who were involved in the Institute of Medicine report of intentionally downplaying the importance of such mycotic diseases as aspergillosis, cryptococcosis and histoplasmosis. She also challenged Clark and her fellow members of the scientific community

to stop referring to mold victims as “anecdotes.”

Segal said that mold is not viewed as an actionable issue among many members of Congress. Instead, it is more of a laughing matter, he said, simply because legislators say they would take no action on such an issue without science warranting it.

He said that because the Institute of Medicine report was unable to establish sufficient evidence for an association between damp indoor spaces and some of the more serious health effects considered, such as neurotoxic effects, many in the legislative arena do not see the need for action.

Segal said he would welcome any effort by the federal government to communicate more effectively the immediate needs of thousands of people said to be suffering from ill effects from molds and other indoor air contaminants.