

Duke of Kent Celebrates 25 years of Environmental Medicine in Birmingham

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HRH the Duke of Kent will visit the University of Birmingham Institute of Occupational and Environmental Medicine this week to commemorate the institute's 25 years of work.

The visit comes at a time when institute scientists are warning of a number of emerging environmental health risks particularly in the developing world. In the UK there are challenges for researchers in understanding the links between long-term unemployment and ill health.

Occupational medicine at the Institute looks at the effects of work on health particularly in occupations which can cause asthma or cancer. However, there is also ongoing work to highlight the importance of rehabilitation to allow staff off work for health reasons to return to work.

The Institute is also a leading centre for the study of human exposure to air pollutants and measuring environmental health risks in large populations and is leading the development of the University's overall approach to Environment and Human Health research.

Ongoing projects include co-ordinating the first ever long-term study assessing the health risks to workers regularly exposed to radio-frequency radiation, particularly those in the telecommunication and broadcast industries and work examining daily exposure to pollutant chemicals in the air.

Professor Jon Ayres the Institute's Director comments: "Understanding the risks that both the occupational and non-occupational environment poses to human health is still a hugely important challenge. The sources of exposure and the chemicals involved have changed in the 25 years since the Institute was founded with a substantial loss of heavy industry and the expansion of service related jobs.

Consequently the methods we use to define these risks are constantly improving to meet the challenge. This means linking new technology that for instance greatly improve our ability to monitor chemicals with studies of large populations, to make clear links between exposure and health risks."

The potential health risk from biomass smoke is one of the emerging environmental health threats. Across the developing world the burning of wood, animal dung and crop residues is a major source of human exposure to pollutants with women and children being exposed to around 1000 times higher levels of smoke during cooking than are in the outside air in Birmingham.

Researchers in the Institute are investigating these problems in Nepal and Malawi, particularly amongst children and how this translates into future health problems.

Professor Ayres comments: "Biomass smoke is a huge health problem globally causing nearly as much ill health as HIV/AIDS.

Exposure, particularly in infants is very high across the developing world and this is of particular concern.

Clearly in many developing countries biomass is the major source of fuel and heat. However, this does not mean that aren't solutions that would allow us to reduce exposure. This could be as simple as encouraging people to cook outdoors or moving infants away from the source of smoke."

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To arrange interviews or photography or for further media information contact: Ben Hill, Press Officer, University of Birmingham, Tel 0121 4145134, Mobile 07789 921163, email b.r.hill@bham.ac.uk (<mailto:b.r.hill@bham.ac.uk>)

Notes

The Institute of Occupational and Environmental Medicine

The Institute focuses its work on research and teaching that prevents health hazards in the workplace or the general environment. The main research areas are divided into environment-oriented and outcome-oriented research areas, which overlap and complement each other.

The environment-oriented areas follow the tradition of preventive medicine with a focus on causal determinants: Environmental health and epidemiology, Occupational health and epidemiology, and Exposure and risk assessment. The outcome-oriented research areas are based on clinical medicine and epidemiology: Cancer, Respiratory health, reproductive health, Ergonomics and musculoskeletal health, Neuro-psychological/mental health, and skin diseases.

The Institute is a World Health Organisation collaborating centre for occupational health and staff have international collaborations with scientists in Norway, Finland, United States, Taiwan, China, Chile and Brazil amongst others.

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