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The National Environmental Education & Training Foundation

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NEW GUIDELINES DESIGNED TO FILL A GAP IN MEDICAL AND NURSING EDUCATION AND TRAINING

“Environmental Management of Pediatric Asthma” Provides Clinicians User-Friendly Tools to Help Patients

WASHINGTON, November 3, 2005—Responding to mounting data that primary care providers need more environmental health training to prevent, recognize and treat diseases caused by environmental exposures, The National Environmental Education & Training Foundation (NEETF) today released *Environmental Management of Pediatric Asthma: Guidelines for Health Care Providers*. The National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS), a component of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), funded development of the guidelines.

The guidelines are designed to help pediatric primary care providers advise families about environmental interventions to help reduce or eliminate triggers for children diagnosed with asthma, the nation’s leading pediatric chronic illness.

“In many cases, controlling a child’s exposure to environmental triggers is critical to managing asthma,” said James R. Roberts, MD, MPH, Associate Professor, Department of General Pediatrics at the Medical University of South Carolina, and the primary author of the guidelines. “But today’s physicians and nurses haven’t been sufficiently trained to help families understand environmental asthma triggers and how to limit their children’s exposure to specific triggers outdoors and indoors at home, school, or their day care setting.”

The role of environmental triggers of asthma is well recognized and has been included in the NIH, National Heart Lung and Blood Institute, *National Asthma Education and Prevention Program (NAEPP) Guidelines for the Diagnosis and Management of Asthma*. Research, including the Inner-City Asthma Study about individualized, home-based environmental interventions for hundreds of children in major

U.S. cities, has demonstrated that environmental interventions decreased allergen levels, resulting in reduced asthma symptoms.

“As a physician who treats patients with asthma and as a parent of an asthmatic child, I understand the importance of tools such as these to ensure environmental factors are considered as an aid in the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of asthma,” said NIEHS Director David A. Schwartz, M.D. “There are simple steps parents can take to reduce allergens that trigger asthma in their children. By teaching parents how to reduce allergens, healthcare providers can create a partnership that involves the parents in the process of improving their child’s health.”

According to a recent study published in *Environmental Health Perspectives*, pediatric medical and nursing education currently lacks the environmental health content necessary to appropriately prepare pediatric health care professionals to prevent, recognize, and manage diseases related to environmental exposures.

“In general, neither medical and nursing curricula nor pediatric practices frequently or fully incorporate environmental management and environmental history-taking into pediatric asthma treatment,” said Leyla Erk McCurdy, NEETF Senior Director of Health & Environment Programs. “Over half of practicing pediatricians recently surveyed had seen a patient with health issues related to environmental exposures, but fewer than one-fifth were trained in taking an environmental history.”

More than six million American children have asthma, which is the leading cause of school absenteeism attributed to chronic conditions and the third-leading cause of hospitalizations among children under age 15. Asthma can be a life-threatening disease if not properly controlled through appropriate asthma care management, which relies on physicians’ and nurses’ clinical knowledge and skills, as well as parents’ and children’s daily attention to asthma triggers and medications. Environmental asthma triggers include allergens and pollutants. Allergens can be dust mites, cockroaches, animal allergens, molds, and pollens. Indoor and outdoor pollutants include secondhand smoke, chemicals, combustion by-products, smog and fine particles.

“Our long-term commitment is to incorporate these guidelines into medical and nursing curricula so that our future generations of primary care providers have the fundamental knowledge and skills base to manage environmental factors of pediatric asthma,” Dr. Roberts said.

Environmental Management of Pediatric Asthma: Guidelines for Health Care Providers is filled with practical strategies for integrating environmental management of asthma into health professional's curriculum and clinical practice. These practical strategies are built upon NEETF's previous study funded by the NIEHS, which examined the medical and nursing educational structures and identified the leverage points where environmental health can be incorporated.

The guidelines were developed and peer-reviewed by expert panels and are founded on the National Asthma Education and Prevention Program (NAEPP) Guidelines for the Diagnosis and Management of Asthma and are intended to be used in conjunction with its clinical and pharmacological components, as part of a child's comprehensive asthma management plan. The guidelines are built on current best practices and include competencies for management of environmental asthma triggers in pediatric care; a quick, user-friendly environmental history form; intervention guidelines for specific environmental triggers; patient flyers that are perforated for easy duplication; and references. The guidelines are supplemented by an online list of resources with Web links.

The guidelines are part of NEETF's Pediatric Asthma Initiative in partnership with the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences. The initiative is a long-term project focused on integrating environmental management of asthma into pediatric medical and nursing education and practice. The guidelines are an extension of NEETF's *Position Statement on Health Professionals and Environmental Health Education*, which is endorsed by more than 20 leading medical, nursing and education organizations such as American Academy of Pediatrics, Ambulatory Pediatric Association, National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners, American Association of Colleges of Nursing, and Association of Academic Health Centers. Complete guidelines are available at <http://www.neetf.org/Health/asthma.htm>.

The National Environmental Education & Training Foundation was chartered by Congress in 1990 as a private nonprofit organization to develop and support environmental learning programs to meet social goals and build partnerships among government, the private sector and non-governmental organizations. See www.neetf.org for more information.