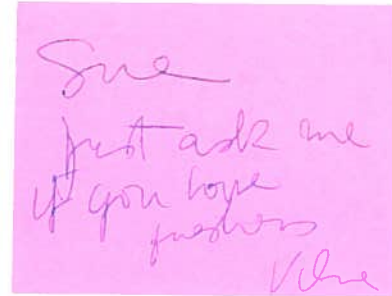


The Bahia-Carolina Project: A North-south Partnership for Workplace and Environmental Justice

Vilma S. Santana, MD, PhD
Instituto de Saúde Coletiva, Universidade Federal de Bahia
University of North Carolina

Dama P. Loomis, PhD
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
School of Public Health



The origin of the Bahia-US training program in occupational and environmental health is rooted in the long term ties built by faculty and former students from the Federal University of Bahia, mainly from the Department of Preventive Medicine of the Medical School, who came to the graduate program in Epidemiology in the School of Public Health at UNC-CH.

Seeking more fertile ground to reinforce a multiprofessional perspective in the field of public health, members of the Department of Preventive Medicine decided to create an independent unit, the Institute of Collective Health (Instituto de Saúde Coletiva, or ISC). Founded in 1995, with the support of institutions as PAHO, WHO, and local liberal organizations such as ABRASCO, the political and scientific fundamentals and general actions of ISC were defined following debates with federal, state and local health care institutions, as well as representatives from several schools and research centers of the health area.

The goals of the ISC are based on the idea that health care involves promotion, protection, treatment and rehabilitation, and that these are essentially social actions which emerge from the relationships between and within social groups. Therefore, the subject-matter of collective health evolves from biology to the social sciences and involves the search for determinants of the social production of diseases, the social organization of health services and the study of the historical bases of knowledge and health practices, encompassing not only the academy but popular wisdom and grassroots understanding. With several other health care institutions, the ISC has been committed to the standpoint that knowledge and technology might be developed towards concrete problems from the people's struggles and needs.

The ISC's structure is defined by major issues on the Brazilian health agenda, as defined by the 9th National Health Conference in 1996. Environmental and occupational health problems affect large numbers of people across the country, but the responses to them or the assessment of its public health impact has not been adequate. One of the reasons for this is the small number of qualified people, the poorly addressed content of many of the health-related professional curricula, insufficient occupational and environment health services, inappropriate policies, and a still incipient research development.

The main goal of this Fogarty Center-funded project is to develop the field of occupational and environment health in search of improvement of the workplace and the environment and improved wellbeing of the general population, founded on principles of justice and equity. The main goal of this this project (Fogarty) is to develop the field of occupational and environment health searching for a general improvement of the workplace and the environment towards a better wellbeing of the general population, founded by principles of justice and equity. It means that healthy workplaces or environment are not equally distributed and that it is possible to contribute to achieve a more democratic (? or fair?) access a high standard places by human beings. Rather than only emphasize the industry and its impact on the environment, our especific subject-matter involves a still invisible part of the labor force, workers from the informal sector of the economy and the paid and unpaid domestic work done, mainly, by women and their children, which are vital for survival in developing countries. Finnaly, we believe that workers, the general population, the government and civil society organizations have the right to know about the occupational and

environment risks that can affect their lives and the relevance of their responsibilities in developing better workplaces and environment.

It is also one of our principles, to stand for a real partnership on training. This mean, that education might be constructed from the trainees own experience and knowledge, which are unique components for their effectiveness toward better occupational and environment local policies. In addition to that, we believe that US faculties and trainees would enhance their own background by sharing experiences and knowledge with their colleagues from abroad. In this sense, faculties from UNC have spent time teaching and participating in conferences and seminars held in Brazil. Also, graduate students who want to make part of their study work abroad are reinforce to be involved in this program, although they have to search for an alternative source of funding .

1. ACTIONS

1.1 TRAINEE FUNDING

Actions has been developed towards funding visiting students and faculties from the Federal University of Bahia, Institute of Collective Health to the University of North Carolina, who are engaged in occupational and environment-related research or teaching.

Rita Maria Rego, MD, MPH – she is studing the health impact of sewage facilities construction on diarrhea among children in an urban area of the Metropolitan Area of Salvador (finished a pilot study and develop a proposal that is a part of a major research project on the ealth impact of the Salvador Sewage System Construction, the BAHIAZUL project).

Marcos Rego, MD – occupational phisician and a graduate student of the Doctorate in Epidemiology, ISC/UFBA, who is developing a research project aimed at the identification of occupational risk factors for Non-Hodgkin Lymphoma. (finishing data analysis and dissertation).

Nelson Oliveira, Eng. PhD – a one year visiting scholar, biostatistician, who is currently at UNC-CH developing studies on application of logistic regression and multi-level analysis for occupational and environment studies.

Vilma Santana, MD, PhD - also a one year visiting scholar, epidemiologist, developing data analysis of a mortality study of the Brazilian Navy servicemen (1991-1995) and morbidity data of a oil refinery plant from Colombia, in colaboration with PAHO. The development of a research proposal on the incidence of occupational injuries in the informal sector is also planned.

2.2 SHORT COURSES TEACHING

1st International Summer Institute in Occupational and Environment Epidemiology (December 1997)

The theme was – “Theories and Methods for the Improvement of Occupational and Environment Health” . Students of graduate programs, faculties and health professionals of several states of Brazil, attended this 60 hours short course, which was evaluated as “an excellent step” for their education in this field. Financial support was gathered from the Bahia State Health Secretary (in charge of all state occupational health services), and the SESI, a major nationwide occupational health institution partially funded by industrial entrepreneurs and the federal government. Several staff members of both institutions attended the course, where some of them presented and have discussed their own proposals or work experience.

For this year, two workshops are planned : one to be held in Chapel Hill, is intended to bring researchers from Brazil to share their teaching and research experience, particularly, regarding theory and social epidemiology developments, and applications of ethnomethodology in the field of occupational and environment health. In February 1999, it is already planned another short course addressing occupational health surveillance and a seminar in environment justice, with the collaboration of Dr Sylvia Tesch, from the Michigan University at Ann Arbor, who will be in Salvador for a one year sabbatical leave.

3. RESEARCH FUNDING

From the Fogarty Project a small students research grant was set to support dissertations in the field of occupational and environment of currently enrolled graduate students in ISC. After a call for proposals released last November, three proposals were accepted:

- a) Maria Isabel Vianna – “Oral health effects from acid mist exposures” with a budget of (US\$9,700.00);
- b) Marlene Silva – “ Occupational Risk factors for stomach cancer among service men in the Brazilian Navy” (US\$5,200.00);
- c) Martha Itaparica – “ Poison fish consumption by riverine in Conde village, Bahia” (US\$7,500.00)

4. PROPOSALS IN PARTNERSHIP UNC-UFBA

A proposal addressing the issue of occupational injuries among workers in the informal sector of the economy in urban areas of Brazil is already undergoing. Contacts with researchers from the FIOCRUZ-CESTEH-Rio de Janeiro, UNESP-SP-Botucatu, UFPEL- Pelotas, Rio Grande do Sul, UFPM- SP – Sao Paulo were made in order to develop a multisite study in this still challenging and unknown work sector.