This edition of the ACCN Newsletter is dedicated to our first cross-regional health disparities conference, Addressing Cancer Health Disparities in Appalachia. Held at the Embassy Suites Hotel in Charleston, West Virginia June 23-25, 2009, participants from Kentucky, Ohio, Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, West Virginia and Washington, D.C. were able to network and learn about ongoing research and community projects aimed at reducing health disparities in Appalachia. This first of its kind conference was made possible in part by a grant from the National Center on Minority Health and Health Disparities.

The conference kicked-off with a luncheon and opening remarks from Dr. Mark Dignan, ACCN Principal Investigator, University of Kentucky (UK) and Dr. Electra Paskett, ACCN Ohio Region Principal Investigator, The Ohio State University (OSU). Opening presentations framed the conference describing the impact of Appalachian culture on health.

The three-day conference highlighted recent academic and community research being conducted in the region. In addition, the conference offered multiple opportunities for participants to network, including a network evaluation survey.

Perhaps the most entertaining social event of the conference was Appalachian Jeopardy. The contest, held after dinner, grouped participants by table. Using the new ACCN publication, The Cancer Burden in Appalachia 2009, groups answered questions about cancer in Appalachia. After several highly competitive rounds, Table 1 (pictured above) was declared the winner, receiving prize baskets but more importantly, the right to call themselves Appalachian Jeopardy Champs! The conference was a huge success, providing the 138 participants with a network of new regional contacts, insight into innovative community research, and a deeper understanding of Appalachian cancer disparities.

The session on Cervical Cancer and the HPV Vaccine included two presentations on cervical cancer screening and follow-up care, along with two presentations on the HPV vaccine.

Dr. Electra Paskett (ACCN Ohio Region) presented findings from a 5-year research project on cervical cancer in Appalachia Ohio, funded by NCI’s Center for Population Health and Health Disparities titled Predictors of Pap Smear Use within Guidelines. This study showed an increase in cervical cancer risk factors among women in Appalachia Ohio including a high rate of abnormal Pap smears; high rate of smoking; and an even higher rate of smoking among women with abnormal Pap tests.

Patient Navigation for Cervical Cancer in Rural Kentucky, presented by Dr. Mark Dignan (ACCN PI) highlighted a patient navigation program designed to improve understanding of barriers to follow-up experienced by women with abnormal pap test results. To date, 175 patients have been recruited to participate. The preliminary findings of this NCI funded research demonstrate that local patient navigators appear to be reducing the time needed to obtain recommended follow-up care for abnormal Pap test.

In her presentation titled The Availability of HPV Vaccine in Appalachia, Dr. Mira Katz (ACCN Ohio Region) reviewed her findings from 23 focus groups conducted in nine Appalachian Ohio counties to gain insight on the acceptance of the HPV vaccine among women, parents, community leaders and health care providers. In addition, she discussed findings from a cross-regional ACCN study conducted to document HPV vaccine availability, recommendations, cost, and policies among public health departments in seven Appalachian states. Data revealed that the HPV vaccine was available in 93% of the health departments, and the supply of the vaccine did not meet the demand in 10.5% of the health departments mainly due to the high costs.

In HPV Programming in Appalachian Pennsylvania, Allison Clark (ACTION Health Cancer Task Force–ACCN-PSU), described a provider survey and educational programming implemented in her five county region. An initial and follow-up survey among local providers showed that 80% of the providers were offering the vaccine to girls and women aged 9 – 26; 25% accepted referrals of non-patients; 68% were willing to post flyers about HPV educational programs; and only 27% reported concerns about the vaccine. Ms. Clark (pictured right) explained that programming efforts included 13 educational sessions for more than 350 females 9-26 year old, which resulted in a significant increase in both HPV knowledge and intent to receive the HPV vaccine.
First Cross-Regional Conference on Cancer Health Disparities in Appalachia

Environmental Health and Cancer in Appalachia: A Panel Discussion

In their October 2006 article in Preventing Chronic Disease titled “Appalachia: Where Place Matters in Health”, Bruce Behringer and Gilbert Friedell discuss the particular concern of possible environmental contributions to cancer in rural communities. Such concerns include toxic waste, unclean air, occupational exposures, and effluent from farms, mines, and factories that impact water quality.

Environmental epidemiologists are constantly responding to community claims that cancer clusters have been identified, but it is nearly impossible for them to reach any definite conclusions. Appalachian residents are faced with an unenviable dilemma: they fear that environmental causes of cancer may be directly or indirectly related to the industries and jobs that allow them to remain in the mountains they call home, preventing them from pursuing environmental action.

ACCN, spurred to action by the concerns of the ACCN Community Advisory Committee, is seeking ways to respond to community environmental and cancer concerns. The conference featured a panel of regional environmental experts who provided brief overview of the environment and health in Appalachia, and discussed possible roles for ACCN in studying these issues in more depth.

In addition, two panelists conducted presentations that addressed different aspects of environmental health in the region. These presentations were chosen to reflect community and academic discussions occurring in different parts of Appalachia.

Dr. Alana Ducatman, Chair of Community Medicine at West Virginia University (WVU), reviewed the findings to date from a detailed health study conducted in the community of Parkersburg, West Virginia. The study, the result of a landmark settlement between the community and Dupont, has examined a variety of health endpoints that may be associated with exposure to PFOA (C8), a toxicant and carcinogen, from the local Dupont plant. This presentation highlighted the opportunities and challenges that such a detailed health study can offer to the region and demonstrated the level of detail necessary to effectively investigate concerns about environmental exposures and health outcomes.

The second presentation by Dr. Nancy Johnson, DrPH, Postdoctoral Scholar, University of Kentucky, highlighted the need for further investigation into possible linkages between coal and its byproducts, and cancer and other health endpoints in communities in Eastern Kentucky. In her talk, Dr. Johnson noted a number of possible areas for further research to better illuminate this area of concern to Appalachian communities. Overall, the panel provided two approaches to investigating potential environmental determinants of health and cancer in the Appalachian region.

Academic and Community Research on Colorectal Cancer

The Colorectal Cancer session focused on current ACCN research and community efforts to reverse the trends in colorectal cancer incidence and mortality, and work towards reducing colorectal cancer disparities in the Appalachian region. This session offered a review of four unique programs in the region:

1. Courtney Sim, Meigs County (OH) Cancer Initiative (MCCI), discussed efforts of the MCCI to develop and implement the Get Behind Your Health project, a colon cancer media campaign. MCCI conducted a community needs assessment which ultimately led the coalition to implement a large scale media campaign in the local community, including billboards, brochures, public service announcements, and posters.

2. Dr. Mark Dignan (ACCN PI) discussed the ongoing efforts of the Kentucky River Community Advisory Board to conduct a colorectal cancer awareness campaign in Perry County, Kentucky. The group annually conducts a colorectal cancer awareness campaign involving distribution of educational materials and a media campaign with television interviews with survivors and health professionals.

3. Dr. Brenda Kluhsman, ACCN PA/NY Region, The Pennsylvania State University (PSU), presented on a pilot project conducted by William Curry, MD, MPH and co-investigators at PSU. The goal of the project was to conduct an intervention with rural primary care providers to increase colorectal cancer screening and knowledge in rural practices. The study demonstrated that providers gained knowledge about newer screening options such as the fecal immunochemical test (FIT) and virtual colonoscopy. In addition, completed colorectal cancer screenings in three project practice sites increased from 17% to 35%.

4. Samuel Lesko, MD, MPH and investigators from the Northeast Regional Cancer Institute in Scranton, PA (ACCN PA/NY Region) presented results of a project to examine the stage at diagnosis of colorectal cancer in patients in relation to characteristics of primary care physicians. The results showed that physician training was associated with stage at diagnosis. Physicians who were board certified found colorectal cancer at an earlier stage at diagnosis, which could improve the chance of survival.

Megan Higgins, (ACCN OH Region), discusses the Connect to Health project at a poster session featuring academic and community–based participatory research.
Tobacco causes 87% of all lung cancers, of which 90% are fatal. Three presentations focused on testing interventions to increase smoking cessation and influence quit rates. Settings for these research efforts include primary care offices, the school system, and the community.

Mary Ellen Wewers, Ph.D, M.P.H., (ACCN Ohio Region) presented the results of a randomized controlled trial using either a computer tablet or a Quit Line pamphlet to encourage primary care patients to quit smoking. The 169 patients were randomly assigned to either the control or intervention groups. The average age of patients was 43. Participants had an average of nearly a 25 year smoking history. Patients’ biochemical follow-up confirmed abstinence from tobacco at month 3 and month 6 post-treatment. Although the computer was easy to use, no difference existed in quit attempts, quit rates or nicotine replacement use by both groups. Researchers determined health delivery systems complicate the effectiveness of counseling and medication dispensing.

A presentation on Not on Tobacco (N-O-T), a teen smoking cessation program in West Virginia, was presented by Tony Richards of the American Lung Association. West Virginia prevalence data shows that 27.8% of high school students currently smoke, while 14.8% use smokeless tobacco products. Among middle school aged children, 11.7% smoke and 6.5% use spit tobacco. Using a behavior change model, trained N-O-T facilitators meet with students at school for weekly sessions to address tobacco dependence. The N-O-T program, developed at WVU by Drs. Geri Dino and Kimberly Horn, is a peer-reviewed Research Tested Intervention Program and a model program for Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. This school-based program produced a 22% quit rate.

Deirdra Robinson, MSW, (ACCN KY Region), shared a report from the Rural Smoke-free Communities Project: Breathe Easy Perry County Partnership. Perry County, KY is one of 40 rural control and treatment counties participating in this study (Dr. Ellen Hahn, PI). As a treatment county, the Perry County Partnership focused on a readiness assessment and intervention, addressing the need for planning and policy review in preparation for advocating clean indoor air policy.

The Partnership created branding materials to increase hospitality venue awareness of indoor air pollution, and Partnership members tested air quality in local venues. Results of the air quality testing showed that the level of air pollution in Perry County hospitality venues was 3.2 times higher than the National Ambient Air Quality Standard for Outdoor Air.

These presentations demonstrated varied methods used to address tobacco addiction, and also demonstrated a strong commitment of Appalachian researchers and community partners to improve lung cancer and tobacco control outcomes in the region.

"Energy balance" describes the complex relationship between diet, physical activity, and genetics on growth and body weight over a person’s lifetime. Regular physical activity to balance the number of calories eaten each day is crucial in preventing weight gain. Being overweight or obese increases the risk for cancer including postmenopausal breast cancer, colon, esophageal, endometrial, renal cell, and other cancers. The June research seminar highlighted three community-based projects aimed at reducing cancer risk.

Eileen S. Anderson, EdD, Virginia Tech, presented results from a randomized study, Cancer Prevention: Nutrition and Physical Activity Outcomes of a Group Randomized Trial of an Internet-Based Intervention in Churches. This study was designed to test a church-based Guide to Health (GTH) to improve nutrition (more fiber/fruits/vegetables, less fat, sugared beverages), increase physical activity (more steps/walking time) and energy balance (weight gain prevention) among members of 23 Appalachian churches. The GTH consisted of 12 interactive, highly visual, Internet modules guided by a narrator, with weekly introduction of new content, self-monitoring and reporting of daily steps and target food choices. Monetary incentives were offered for self monitoring data collection. Preliminary results show that the web-based intervention is effective, accessible, and can be individually tailored.

Sharon Carver, RN, MSN, (shown below) from Southern Ohio Medical Center and Chair of the Fight Cancer Save Lives Coalition (ACCN-OSU), described a church-based program, Walk by Faith. This project works with the church community to increase awareness about cancer prevention and promote physical activity. With help from the Scioto County Ministerial Association, coalition members identified churches and recruited participants through church bulletin inserts, bulletin boards, and announcements during church events. A single-session educational program with a pre- and post-test was conducted on the benefits of physical activity to reduce cancer risk. Overall, 107 participants attended the educational sessions held at 4 churches. Of these, 45.8% of church members aged 27 to 100 years agreed to participate in the walking program, using activity cards to track their daily steps, fruit and vegetable consumption, and water intake. In total, 40 participants completed the program and walked 8,459,641 steps, representing up to a 20% increase in steps walked.

Jeanne Darling, Cornell University Cooperative Extension (New York) and Chair of the Delaware County Cancer Coalition (ACCN-PSU), presented a 10-week worksite program, Small Steps Are Easier Together, designed to increase walking and healthy eating. A health educator and representatives from each of four worksites formed leadership teams. Each team conducted an environmental needs assessment at their worksite, developed an action plan, and recruited employee participants. Results showed a steady increase in participants reaching the walking goal from week 1 (56%) to week 7 (64%), with a slight decline in weeks 8 through 10 (49%, 57%, 42%, respectively). Participants walked the equivalent of 2.5 times around the world!
Addressing Communication Barriers in Appalachia

Improving future communication about cancer is important. Communication about cancer issues and concerns spans many different forms from the popular press, websites and blogs to patients and providers dialogue to traditional Appalachian storytelling. Addressing barriers to improving communication about cancer and cancer care in the future was the theme of this session.

Janice Raup-Krieger, PhD, OSU, presented the findings from a study examining coverage of the HPV Vaccine in Appalachian and non-Appalachian newspapers in Ohio. The researchers found that newspapers in the non-Appalachian region of Ohio were more likely to mention: 1. incidence and mortality rates for cervical cancer; 2. that HPV is a sexually transmitted disease; 3. that HPV causes cervical cancer; 4. risk factors for cervical cancer; 5. that the vaccine is intended for girls; 6. the approved age for vaccination and that it should be administered prior to the beginning of sexual activity; 7. that the vaccine can prevent genital warts and cervical cancer; and 8. include information about the cost and coverage for the vaccine.

Dr. Dan Doyle, MD of the New River Health Association (WV) discussed cultural concerns and their affect on communication in cancer care. Cultural differences affect every medical visit with healthcare providers and their patients. These cultural differences include language, literacy, health beliefs, social class and power differences. Dr. Doyle’s presentation traced some of the key studies that have been done in the past 30 years looking at the language and communication between practitioners and their clients. In general, they found that healthcare providers and patients talk about health and illnesses in ways that are very different and make a shared understanding with one another challenging. Some of the suggestions for providers to begin improving communication with their clients include: taking time to build a relationship together, developing and using a common health language, eliciting and respecting truthful information and working to reach agreement about care plans together.

Storytelling, with its long and rich tradition in Appalachia, has served as an effective tool for communicating about health issues including cancer. Anne Duesing, a medical librarian and resource specialist from the University of Virginia in Wise, VA shared a retrospective look at the role of storytelling in communicating about cancer in southwest Virginia. Beginning in 1992 with the original Appalachian Leadership Initiative in Cancer, storytelling has been an important tool for raising awareness and providing information and education about cancer. Storytelling in the form of life circles, reader’s scripts, story circles and plays have addressed breast, cervical, prostate and colorectal cancer. Story circles have helped to identify local issues and led to the development of: a local cancer resource and support center, community based access to the computer based CancerHelp Program, Car- ing Hearts Cancer Support Group and I Can Cope Cancer Meetings and Teleconferences.