An important first-of-its-kind meeting will occur early next month (Oct. 7 and 8) in New Orleans, LA. Grass roots activists are urged to attend, as are scientists and medical doctors. It is the First Annual Scientific Assembly for Environmental Health, and it represents a bold new departure by the grass roots movement against toxics. For the first time ever, grass roots activists have convened a medical conference to discuss toxic exposures and what must be done about them.

With this conference, the grass roots movement ratchets up the pressure on polluters, declares its independence from the medical establishment, and begins to set its own agenda for the future. The Chemical Manufacturers Association (CMA) and the American Medical Association (AMA) had best pay close attention. Bob Dylan said it: "Something is happening and you don't know what it is, do you, Mr. Jones?"

The grass roots movement against toxics gets its primary energy from people who have become sick from chemicals. This is not principally an environmental movement--it is a movement of people fighting for their lives, fighting for their rights, fighting for justice for themselves and for their children. If they happen to save the whales in the bargain, so much the better. But that's not the main goal: the main goal is simple human health, a safe home, good food and water, a fair shake for people and their neighbors.

Many of the victims of modern chemistry are literally fighting for their lives, and the lives of their children. They are real human beings with real stories to tell. They are not "hysterical housewives." They are mothers of children with Hodgkin's disease, or leukemia or chronic bronchitis, or with chemical sensitivities so bad they need to carry an oxygen tank to the supermarket. Or they are people with emphysema or eczema or any of a hundred other disabilities brought on by the chemicals spewed into our homes, or workplaces, our schools by the "better living through chemistry" mentality. Some are people who have a neighbor or a friend whose life has been disrupted, in some cases, destroyed, by toxic exposure. Their message is urgent and compelling and simple: we want justice, an end to the pain, the suffering, the carelessness and cruelty of the users and dumpers of toxic chemicals.

As the nation's use of chemicals increases at a steady 6 percent per year, the ranks of the victims grow apace. Leaders like Lois Gibbs, whose children were affected by chemicals dumped at Love Canal, have given strength and a voice to victims who used to think it was their own fault that they were sick. Or who were content to remain silent in their rage. No more. The new leaders have spawned other leaders and now nearly 5,000 groups of citizens have spontaneously arisen across the country to protect themselves from toxics. It is a movement without a name, though we think of it as the Movement for Environmental Justice. It is growing daily, and it is on the move. Industry calls it the NIMBY movement--not in my back yard. But industry misses the point. It is a NIABY movement--not in ANYONE'S back yard. No one should be victimized by chemicals, this movement says. It is not "chemophobia." It is common sense.

The conference October 7 and 8 has been organized by Linda King, who is on the staff of Citizens Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste's (CCHW's) southern office in Harvey, Louisiana. At 35, Linda is herself, a victim of chemical exposure. For several years she lived in Virginia, in one of the most polluted valleys in America. "You could tell what plants were operating by the color of the sky-red, orange, brown, green, or black," she says, not joking. Linda believes her most serious exposures came from releases from a chemical plant run by Monsanto. "Some days you felt as if your lungs weighed 150 pounds," she says. Since those days she has become increasingly sensitive to all sorts of chemicals--she has developed allergic reactions to food additives and home cleaning products and industrial solvents in household water.

The general syndrome is called "ecological illness" or "environmental illness." It is a burgeoning field of medical study, but the medical establishment (the AMA, for example) does not recognize the existence of the syndrome. It took Linda King five years to find a doctor who would treat her illness with anything except tranquilizers, who would take her seriously and try to understand her condition.

"The patient is victimized twice," Linda says, "first by industry, then by the medical establishment." Most victims fall silent, blame themselves, retire from life so to speak. But increasingly, the victims are seeing that they can fight back.

One of Linda King's ways of fighting back is to organize an "awareness service" that she calls the PHYSICIANS CLEARINGHOUSE, to provide news and information, a network for medical doctors interested in ecological illness, and for victims. The service costs $25 per year for professionals, and $15 per year for non-professionals. Each month, Linda mails six to eight pages of material from medical journals, to increase awareness of new developments in the field. To subscribe, write: CCHW, P.O. Box 926, Atlanta, GA 30322; (703) 276-7070.

The conference coming up Oct. 7 and 8 is aimed at two groups of people: medical practitioners, and grass roots community leaders. Two separate sets of workshops will be run for the two groups, but there will be general sessions and social events where the two groups can mingle. Enrollment is limited, so contact Linda King at (504) 340-2321, or Jeff Daigle at (504) 928-1315. Don't just show up unannounced; make sure there's still space by phoning ahead.

Anyone interested in ecological illness will want to read three publications: (1) ECOLOGICAL ILLNESS LAW REPORT, edited by Aaron Davis, P.O. Box 6099, Evanston, IL 60091; phone (312) 256-3730; $30/yr.; (2) THE REACTOR, edited by Susan Molloy, P.O. Box 575, Corte Madera, CA 94925; phone (415) 924-5141; $20/yr ($10 for low income) and (3) THE DELICATE BALANCE, edited by Mary Lamielle, Environmental Health Association of New Jersey, 1100 Rural Avenue, Voorhees, NJ 08043; phone (609) 429-5358. $15/yr ($10 for low income, $20 for businesses). Note: Next week we'll continue our series on U.S. waste problems. "What we must do." In it, we are discussing waste haulers, waste producers, and, finally, remedies.

--Peter Montague

Descriptor terms: physicians; citizen groups; environmentalists; conferences; la; toxic exposures; exposure; chemical manufacturing; chemical manufacturers association; american medical association; ma; health; health statistics; disease statistics; hodgkin's disease; leukemia; cancer; bronchitis; chemical production; chemical industry; lois gibbs; love canal; nimby; linda king; cchw; monsanto; water; ecological illness; jeff daigle; monsanto; environmental illness;