Environmental health is the field concerned with the scientific knowledge on, and formulation of policies and actions targeting the interaction between human health and the natural and anthropic environmental factors which determine, condition and influence it, to improve the quality of life of human beings from the perspective of sustainability.

The notion of sustainability includes economic, social, ecologic, spatial and cultural dimensions. Within this context, economic efficiency is understood as a function of its social efficacy, rather than of profit alone, and thus includes initiatives for development aiming at improving the standards and quality of life of the population and preserving natural systems and the biodiversity, ensuring their maintenance and regeneration capacity.

From the perspective of sustainability, for development to occur attention should be paid to impacts on natural resources and health along the lifecycle of operations, services and products of companies. More sustainable production patterns, in accordance with environmental protection and social well-being, presuppose a socially responsible attitude. The relevance given by the interested parties - including governments, shareholders, the community, customers, suppliers and consumers - to the challenge of achieving economic development with preservation of the environment and human health is essential for companies to become aware of the impossibility of approaching social, environmental and economic issues separately.

Therefore, ensuring environmental, economic and social sustainability is necessary. Demands should be placed on companies to manage their procedures and passive assets, as well as the impacts of their activities on health. Companies should not restrict themselves to comply with the health and environment legislation, but must adopt a proactive attitude in the planning and development of their activities and actions in a sustainable manner.

To grasp the causal relationship between environmental impacts and their effects on human health, a new approach reaches beyond the classic and traditional health-disease model. Within this context, the term “environment” does no longer encompass its physical or natural side only, but also social, cultural, economic and political aspects. The socioenvironmental context, which results from the interaction between the socioeconomic, political and institutional macrostructure and the particular characteristics and functions of ecosystems, contributes to the vulnerability of the environment and to the risks to human health.

Recognition of exposures to environmental agents and characterization of health risks should ground the development of policies and the definition of health and environment norms, projects and laws centered on the prevention and control of environmental factors and their effects on the health of exposed populations.

In 1996 the European Union adopted Directive 96/61 EC for prevention and control of environmental contaminations derived from its projects. This directive prioritizes prevention through the inclusion, starting at the step of project, of measures to rationalize natural resources through clean technologies in production processes aiming at reducing the generation of waste, and even through the prohibition of dangerous substances. Another relevant aspect is the replacement of the legal maximum permissible limits by better practices and techniques able to ensure the minimum possible human exposure, including the possibility of long-range and transboundary contamination.

Assessments of environmental exposures and health risks should consider the characteristics of exposures and their possible effects on human health. For this purpose, the methods used to collect evidence on environmental exposure and health risk estimates should be based on valid scientific toxicology studies and practices. In addition to the toxicology input, studies to establish causal relationships between environmental agents and their impacts and effects on health should also consider epidemiological methods and instruments, and the assessment and management of environmental risks to human health.
REFERENCES