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Making Connections: Geography and Drug Addiction

Geography involves making connections. Connections in our world among people and places, cultures, human activities and natural processes. It involves understanding the relationships and "connections" between seemingly disparate or unrelated ideas, and between what is and what might be.

Geography also requires connecting with people. When I first encountered an extraordinarily vibrant, intelligent, and socially engaged scientist at a private dinner about a year ago, I was immediately captivated by the intensity of her intellectual passion to understand how and why people become addicted to drugs, and what could be done to better treat or prevent drug addiction. She was also capable of thinking beyond the bounds of her own discipline in the search for answers. Our conversation that evening, which began with her research on fundamental biochemical processes of drug addiction in the human body evolved inevitably to an exploration of the ways in which research on the geographical context of drug addiction might contribute to better understanding the etiology of addiction, its diffusion, its interaction with geographically variable environmental, social, and economic factors, and the strategies for its treatment and prevention.

This fascinating woman, I soon learned, was not only the Director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse but also the great-granddaughter of Leon Trotsky. Our chance encounter led to further wide-ranging discussions during several subsequent months on the interactions between geography and drug addiction, resulting ultimately in an agreement between the Association of American Geographers and the National Institutes of Health's National Institute on Drug

Abuse (NIH-NIDA) to jointly sponsor a symposium on research topics related to geography and drug addiction.

I am pleased to announce that this special NIDA/AAG Symposium will take place on March 8, 2006, in conjunction with the 2006 AAG Annual Meeting in Chicago. We invite interested geographers, neurosci-



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entists, GIScientists, medical researchers, epidemiologists, geneticists, and others with expertise in geographical dimensions of drug addiction to apply to participate in the symposium. Themes to be addressed include:

- Spatial patterns of drug use and addiction
- Linking spatial models

with neuroscience and genetics in drug abuse research

- Interaction of social and environmental factors with biochemical processes of addiction
- Geographic analysis linking demographic and genetic characteristics related to drug addiction and treatment
- Locational analyses of drug addiction treatment and service delivery facilities
- Neighborhood scale studies of geographic factors (including the built environment) and their interaction with drug addiction, treatment, or prevention
- Use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to better understand and respond to drug addiction
- Spatial diffusion modeling of addictive drug usage and its changing characteristics, including also predictive modeling
- Interaction of other spatially dependent variables with drug addiction, or with prevention and treatment strategies
- Other geographic research relevant to better understanding the etiology of drug use and addiction.

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Attendance at the NIDA/AAG Geography and Drug Addiction Symposium will be open to all and will be free of charge to anyone registered for the AAG's Annual Meeting. Those interested in participating in the symposium as a presenter should submit a one-page summary of their proposed topic, describing relevant research conducted, along with a brief resume or CV to Yonette Thomas, PhD, Chief, Epidemiology Research Branch, NIDA Division of Epidemiology, Services and Prevention Research, at yt38e@nih.gov, and to me (Doug Richardson, AAG Executive Director) at drichardson@aag.org. Poster submissions are also welcome; poster applications need only be accompanied by an abstract. Applications for paper or poster participation in the symposium should be received no later than November 8, 2005, though earlier submission is encouraged. Participation in the symposium as a presenter will be limited to approximately thirty researchers.

Results of the symposium will help guide the development of Requests for Proposals (RFPs) at NIH, and future research agendas within geography and GIScience. A book or special journal issue publication of the symposium results, including selected research papers, is planned for early 2007. Symposium participants should be prepared to develop a full paper for publication if requested by the editors.

The "connections" forged between the topics of geography and drug addiction—and between the AAG and NIDA—will provide geographic con-

text and analysis to support NIH's ongoing efforts to understand the complex processes of drug addiction. I believe it will also create an extraordinarily fertile new arena for geographic research, one which has significant potential for real-world benefit through better understanding and treatment of the scourge which is drug addiction.

For more information on attending or presenting at the NIDA/AAG Geography and Drug Addiction Symposium, visit www.aag.org/nida-aag/research. The Director of the NIH's Institute on Drug Abuse, Dr. Nora Volkow, will deliver the symposium's keynote address. I hope to see you in Chicago!

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