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The development of atopic disease and asthma

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The atopic march starts early and some of us believe that the fetal environment may already be relevant for both the development of subsequent sensitization and disease manifestation.

A number of prospective cohort studies which have been following children from the fetal period or from birth onwards have been initiated in various countries throughout the world. They all hypothesize that very early events under the influence of a variety of environmental factors such as exposure to allergens, infections, and variations in nutrient intake affect the expression of the atopy genotype.

In order to discuss potential environmental as well as life style factors and their relevance for atopy and asthma manifestation, a workshop was organised from 10–13 February 1999 in Fulda, Germany. The presentations during this meeting are summarized in this supplement, where they provide an update of the rapidly progressing field. It is obvious that our understanding of the complex interaction between genetic factors and the variety of environmental influences is still poor. Some encouraging aspects of secondary prevention by early pharmaco-therapy have been discussed. Before primary prevention of asthma and allergies will be possible, a much more comprehensive understanding of the early events of the allergic march and its determinants is obviously necessary.

We are very grateful to SHS for having sponsored the Fulda Workshop and for enabling us to produce this supplement. We are also grateful to those who participated, without whom none of this would have taken place.