

Unseen Consequences

by Alis Valencia

Few of us are willing to be poisoned, but it happens every day. Not so much the acute poisoning that causes severe illness or death, but the chronic exposure to chemicals that may lead to various cancers, birth defects, developmental disorders, Parkinson's disease, diabetes, asthma, learning disabilities, immunological dysfunction, epigenetic effects, and more. It's safe to say there's a broad awareness that toxic chemicals can cause problems but not a full appreciation of how bad the situation is.

Industry's successful efforts to produce, use, and release harmful chemicals practically at will can be readily attributed to corporate involvement in writing legislation and setting regulations; regulatory agencies rendered ineffective by corporate-driven political interests; and use by corporations of the First, Fourth, and Fourteenth amendments to the U.S. Constitution to protect their interests when they violate environmental regulations. We also should remember that corporations lie, either outright or by omission.

These practices, however, fail to explain why there is no large, concerted people's campaign to halt the use and release of toxic chemicals. I suspect that the magnitude of the problem we face has been masked by how difficult it is to believe what we cannot see or prove without doubt. For example: knowing that everyone is exposed to all sorts of toxic chemicals doesn't make the risk real; nor does learning from the Toxics Release Inventory that more than 4.2 billion pounds of 666 toxic chemicals were released into the environment in 2004.

We get concerned when the news of exposure hits home, when we learn that TCE, a cancer-causing solvent, pollutes our drinking water; or that our child's new school was constructed on a poorly remediated brownfield; or that the Bisphenol A



graphic: commtechlab.msu.edu

that leaches from the plastic liners of food and drink containers may cause neural or behavioral abnormalities in infants and children.

We typically learn of such exposures to toxic chemicals by happenstance: In Willits, CA, parents seeking a cause for the mysterious death of their child discovered government records showing that the Remco Hydraulics Corporation had polluted the soil and groundwater with many dangerous chemicals. Residents of Tallevast, FL learned from the men installing monitoring wells in their neighborhood that pollution from a nearby company could be poisoning their well water (subsequently confirmed); and many parents have been alerted to the possible danger to infants and children of exposure to phthalates, chemicals used to soften plastic. Only under emergency conditions is there a government-imposed obligation to inform people that they may be endangered by exposure to toxic chemicals.

Even when there is indisputable evidence of exposure to toxic chemicals, some will deny that any harm could result. In Willits, for example, people have countered claims of harm by saying, "I can name five men who worked for many years at Remco and lived into their eighties," or "I don't know of any teachers at the school across the street from Remco who got sick," or "Anyone who was at risk of lung cancer would have gotten it by now."

They may be right. The problem is that we know so little about chemical toxicity, and what we do know is expressed as statistical probabilities. Other than death from acute poisoning, there is no certainty of cause and effect.

Only a few hundred of the some 80,000 chemicals registered for use in this country have been tested. Moreover, research rarely yields definitive results, so there is always room to sow the doubt that favors the status quo. The EPA, for example, has had such difficulties assessing and reassessing dioxin that in 2006 it released a study begun in 1991 and not yet finalized.

Global warming became real to many people when they saw the photos of melting glaciers in "An Inconvenient Truth." We need to make the poisoning of the planet a compelling issue if we are to avoid another tragedy on the proportions of global warming.

Alis Valencia is currently writing a book on "Toxic Denial."

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A Legal Cover-Up

When Willits, CA resident Donna Avila learned that she and her family had been exposed to dangerous chemicals from Remco, all of their health problems suddenly made sense. She learned quickly, however, that people who have been harmed by exposure to toxic chemicals have just one way to get help: file a lawsuit against the polluter.

Plaintiffs face an uphill battle in the legal arena. Before trial, they must document their exposure to chemicals (what, how, when, how much) and provide evidence linking their illnesses to the exposure. Given the state of the science, this is nearly an impossible task.

When plaintiffs appear to have a good case, the common defense strategy is to avoid trial by offering to settle. Most parties eventually settle, but the general public loses because confidentiality agreements keep all information about exposure, illness, and company practices out of the public record. As a result, it is difficult, if not impossible, to find out how common such lawsuits are, what communities are involved, or what chemicals and health problems are at issue.