

Sandra Steingraber

On Living Downstream

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Pharmaceuticals are tested. Chemicals are not, even though they sometimes act like pharmaceuticals once they get into our bodies. For example, arsenic has the ability to cause lung cancer. Cadmium, which is found in a lot of consumer products and electronics, causes prostate cancer. Both of these chemicals find their way into drinking water. But nothing in the law says that burying toxic waste above a drinking water aquifer is a bad practice.

Our regulatory system is unresponsive to new science showing that people who are young, old or in puberty are more sensitive to tiny exposures of toxic chemicals. Nor does the regulatory system take into account multiple exposures of chemicals or that some of us are more genetically susceptible than others.

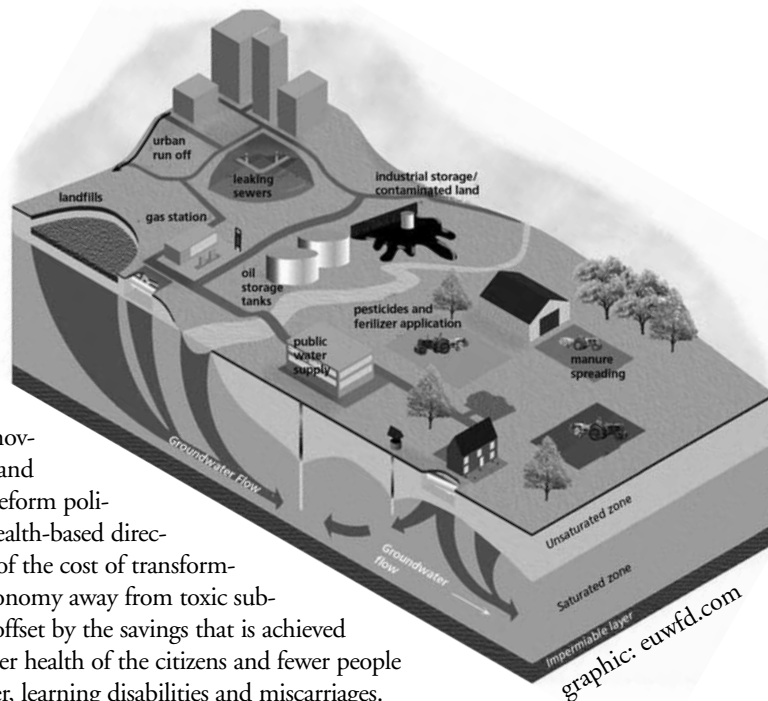
There is very little built into the law that requires regulators to look at these aspects of exposure. The Toxic Substances Control Act (TOSCA) of the 1970s requires testing new chemicals. However, all of the chemicals already on the market were grandfathered in and allowed to be sold without any testing of their safety. There are 62,000 of these pre-TOSCA chemicals that are assumed to be innocent until proven guilty. Moreover, as is documented by journalist Mark Schapiro in his new book *Exposed*, the part of the law that compels the government to pull off the market chemicals demonstrated to be harmful sets the bar so high that only five chemicals have been barred.

Then, when a chemical is known to be toxic, rather than phase out our dependence on that chemical, we do experiments in the lab to determine the maximum amount we can allow in air, food and water before harm is more than negligible. We may look to see if it causes cancer, but not if it affects our hormones or enzyme levels or alters brain growth development that might lead to a learning disability.

A growing breach has developed between the way the United States regulates toxic production and the way the European Union does it, which is more precautionary. This allows new science to come in and show us that things are more dangerous at lower levels than we ever thought. The European system uses inherent toxicity as its trigger for action, which is a more rational approach. They outlawed burying heavy metals in the European Union because sooner or later they will find their way into the developing brain of a fetus or a man's testicles.

What the Europeans have done is say, "We don't care how long the chemicals have been on the market. We are going to require that the 62,000 chemicals that were around before TOSCA be tested." The Europeans are now going to be creating a huge database for these chemicals

European national health care seems to be playing



a role in moving toxics and chemical reform policies in a health-based direction. Part of the cost of transforming the economy away from toxic substances is offset by the savings that is achieved in the better health of the citizens and fewer people with cancer, learning disabilities and miscarriages. When you have a national health care system, there is a natural system built in for cancer prevention. I am a strong proponent of national health care. It seems like the most rational and efficient of all the systems out there. Now, we externalize health costs by pushing people off the insurance roles and by privatizing care.

A lot of activists are asking if these government and regulatory policies are not a violation of our Fourth Amendment rights to the security of persons from toxic trespass. Such citizen activists have a history of changing our policies. What I often tell my audiences is that we are all musicians in a great human orchestra. It is time now to play the save the world symphony, none of us has to play solo. But we are required to know what instrument we hold and play it as well as we can in concert with others. None of us have to do it all. That would make us throw up our hands and get depressed. Just choose one thing and do it well and do it with passion.

Sandra Steingraber is author of Living Downstream: An Ecologist Looks at Cancer and the Environment. Her recent research on the consequences of chemicals in the environment, The Falling Age of Puberty in US Girls is available for free at breastcancerfund.org

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Europeans Lead the Way

A few years ago, Europeans banned from lipstick, deodorant and shampoo all the chemicals that are known or suspected to cause cancer or birth defects and chromosomal defects. The global companies that make these products have been compelled to reformulate them using safe ingredients in order to keep selling them in the European Union

Now there is a new Cosmetics Act in California that says, in effect, if there are any ingredients in this product that you can not sell in Belgium, then you have to label it as such. We suspect that the global manufacturers are not going to want these products labelled and, since they have already been reformulated for Europe, Californians will have the benefit of these reformulated products. It will be interesting to see if the rest of the people in this country will get these reformulated products. As Mark Schapiro points out, the laws impacting toxins in the global marketplace are now being written in Belgium, not Washington, DC.