

Emerging Pollutants

A Perspective from the Frontline

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Pollution and the workplace

- Pollution originates in the workplace
 - Workers are exposed to products first
 - Eg: pesticides
 - The production process is the source of much of pollution
- The first line of defence against emerging pollutants is the workplace
 - Health and safety issues in the workplace become the first point of interaction
 - Protection of the worker becomes the first line of defence for the environment
 - The role of workers in preventing environmental release of pollutants can be significant
 - We are at the source of pollutant release
 - We can be the first avenue of public participation in product decisions
 - But that requires significant change
- But the role of workers is limited
 - Many would say "rightly so"
 - But the reality

Problems:

- Environment role is limited
 - Workers have no control over the product they produce
 - Workers have little or no legislated right to intervene in the environmental issues
 - Workers have little or no knowledge about what happens after pollutant leaves the workplace
- Workers have significant problems with protecting health in the workplace

What happens with new pollutants in the workplace?

- What are the issues facing unions?
- examples
- What are the solutions?

So what are some of the problems?

1. **New chemicals are not tested for health effects before they enter the production process**
 - **Over 80,000 chemicals introduced into the workplace and still counting**
 - ♦ **How many have been studied?**
 - **Therefore requirements for disclosure of health effects cannot be effective**
 - ♦ **MSDS sheets cannot disclose dangers that are not known**

2. **Information is often not available to workers**
 - **Studies take place without worker knowledge**
 - **Employers are in a position to notice patterns that workers cannot as easily see**
 - **There are ways around disclosure in MSDS sheets**
 - ♦ **Carcinogens that are less than 1% of material do not have to be disclosed**
 - **Know that endocrin disruptors are dangerous at extremely small levels**
 - **Information that is available**
 - ♦ **Is not necessarily easily available**
 - **Workers health and safety reps have limited time and ability to access information**

3. **Dangers aren't identified until something is found to be wrong**
 - **Usually you don't know there is a danger until it is too late**
 - ♦ **Latency periods often vary from 10 to 40 years**
 - ♦ **Then there are a series of problems**
 - **More on that later**

4. **Immediate health effects can sometimes show up - but**
 - **Patterns don't show up until a lot of people are affected**
 - **Workers are often moved out of exposure**
 - ♦ **Sometimes without the worker being aware**
 - **Workers are often not provided with information**
 - ♦ **Eg: Holmes foundry**
 - **MOL investigations**
 - **Exposure levels set to protect against immediate health effects are set at levels that may not be (likely aren't) appropriate for long term effects**
 - **Worker exposure is often reduced by venting**
 - ♦ **Eg: auto parts plant**
 - ♦ **Aircraft plant**

5. Discovering long term health effects

- People get sick
 - ♦ How do we know it is related to work
- Workers disperse
 - ♦ How do we know how many workers are sick
- If we note a pattern
 - ♦ How do we prove it is related to the workplace
- Where do the resources come from to examine patterns
 - ♦ Where do we start
 - ♦ Can the workers study the 80,000 plus chemicals?
 - ♦ Can we examine the myriad of new chemicals introduced every year?

6. The problems of science

- The science that isn't brought to bear in studying chemicals before they are introduced to the workplace becomes a barrier to determining what is happening to health in the workplace (and by extension in the environment)
- Studies
 - ♦ take time
 - ♦ are expensive
 - ♦ findings must be demonstrated in repeated studies involving large numbers
 - ♦ determinations can always be contested
 - the forums for contesting the evidence take time and resources
 - something that workers do not have a lot of

7. Examples:

- Auto parts plant
- Plastics and endocrine disrupters
- Aluminum
- EMF
- Fibreglass

The role of the various parties

Employers:

1. Eliminate or reduce use of toxics
 - Make use of substitution
2. Recognize that most if not all chemicals are dangerous
 - Often at low exposures
3. Consider and study alternatives in the production process at the outset
 - Eg Carpet company
4. Study chemicals before introducing them
 - Precautionary principle
5. Co-operate with and inform the workers
 - Full disclosure of known dangers
 - Full disclosure of observed trends
6. Recognize that we cannot wait for scientific certainty before we act

Government

1. Recognize the nature of the problem
2. Legislate
 - requirements for pretesting
 - stronger disclosure provisions
3. Enforcement
4. Resources
 - Enforcement
 - Training
 - ♦ Occupational and environmental medicine
 - ♦ Health training in the educational system
 - Independent occupational medical centres

Unions

1. organize
2. educate
3. negotiate
 - eg environmental issues
 - product design and makeup
 - EPR campaign
4. develop alternatives
 - worker studies
 - worker training
5. lobby