

First-Ever Government Report a 'Wake-up Call' on Toxic Exposure of Average Americans

WASHINGTON, March 21 -- Public health experts and representatives from some of the nation's largest health, education, religious, environmental, children's, and women's organizations reacted with serious concern today to a government report confirming the presence of multiple toxic chemicals in the bodies of ordinary citizens. The report released today by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that chemicals commonly used by industry, in agriculture, and in some popular consumer products were present in the bodies of most of the 5,000 Americans tested.

This report is a wake-up call," said Philip Landrigan, M.D., Professor of Pediatrics at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine and Chair of the Committee that produced the 1993 National Academy of Sciences report, Pesticides in the Diets of Infants and Children. "Americans are clearly being exposed to an array of toxic chemicals, many of which can and should be avoided."

"The widespread exposure identified by the CDC is cause for concern" according to John Balbus, M.D., M.P.H., director of the Center for Risk Science and Public Health at George Washington University. "We do know that some of these chemicals have been associated with various health effects at higher levels -- including certain cancers, birth defects, and developmental and reproductive disabilities. What we don't know is what kinds of problems may be associated with these chemicals at the levels identified today. We should take these findings very seriously."

Today's report had particularly bad news for some children and women of childbearing age for whom levels of mercury were higher than experts, including the National Academy of Sciences in a report last fall, had predicted. Levels of mercury among many more women of childbearing age are high enough such that small increases in exposure could expose them and children in utero to unsafe levels.

The report also revealed that women of childbearing age are regularly exposed to a phthalate (tha-late) most clearly associated with developmental effects in animals, and at levels much higher than estimated by the government's National Toxicology Program just last year. Phthalates are used in plastic products as softeners and in cosmetics and personal care products as carriers of fragrance.

Additionally, experts noted that very high levels of pesticides in a small segment of those tested could be very worrisome if results accurately predicted exposure for the rest of the U.S. population.

"What's really remarkable about the CDC's results is that in several instances the chemical exposure levels they measure in the real world are higher than levels predicted by scientific panels, the National Academy of Sciences, and other experts," said Michael McCally, co-director of the Center for Children's Health and the Environment at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine. "We may need to rethink a lot of our assumptions about the public's exposure to a range of toxic

substances," according to McCally, "or at the very least increasingly rely on these direct, real world measurements."

Balbus and McCally were joined by other physicians and representatives of almost 20 national organizations highlighting the above conclusions of the report and calling for a national program of chemical exposure monitoring vastly larger than the pilot program which produced the results CDC announced today. "There are 80,000 chemicals in commerce today, but only the 27 chemicals in today's report have been systematically monitored for," said Richard Levinson, M.D., associate executive director of the American Public Health Association. "We have to do a lot better," said Levinson.

The organizations called for exposure monitoring programs in every state, monitoring for many more chemicals, and looking much more closely at sensitive subpopulations like children and more highly exposed minority populations.

The organizations underlined two pieces of good news in the government's report today: national blood levels of lead and cotinine -- from second hand smoke -- appear to be declining. "The national lead data show that government regulations to control lead have benefited human health," said Bailus Walker, M.D., chairman of the Alliance To End Childhood Lead Poisoning and former president of the American Public Health Association. "But these national data mask the crushing reality that one-third of pre-school children in many low-income minority communities are still poisoned by lead paint hazards in their homes."