

# Headlines from the Hill

## Nurse advocacy for chemicals policy reform gains exposure

By Rebecca Clouse, MS, RN, and Janet Haebler, MSN, RN

**RECENT PRODUCT RECALLS** have made consumers wary about toxins in toys, cosmetics, and cleaners. These products have been found to pose a risk to human health and the environment, clearly demonstrating that current U.S. chemicals policies don't adequately protect human health and the environment. Chemicals are allowed onto the market and into our homes, workplaces, and communities with little or no toxicity testing. Consumers and workers are often not informed about harmful chemicals in products and equipment, and there's no federal requirement that safer chemicals be substituted for toxic ingredients.

Furthermore, it can take years—sometimes even decades—to remove a chemical from the market once it has been identified. In recent years, the political climate at the federal level has strongly favored keeping the current system. In the absence of federal leadership, a movement to adopt safer policies on chemicals at the state level is evolving rapidly.

Nurses are articulate, trusted healthcare professionals who are highly sought after as advocates. ANA's commitment to expanding advocacy in the area of chemical reform began with the overwhelmingly supported resolution of the 2006 ANA House of Delegates titled "Nursing Practice, Chemical Exposure and Right-to-Know." This landmark resolution directs ANA to promote actions at the state and national levels to reduce and streamline the elimination of toxic chemicals and require use of safer alternatives when possible; support disclosure about adverse health effects; and demand adequate information on the health effects of chemicals before they enter our workplaces and homes. ANA has supported numerous constituent member associations (CMAs) in their work with several exciting initiatives. Critical to that support is building relationships among CMAs, nurse legislators, members of the National Caucus of Environmental Legislators (NCEL), and environmental health coalitions in which ANA has been a linchpin.



Prior to action, education on the issues surrounding chemicals policy has been an ANA priority. ANA delivered presentations at the 2006 and 2007 annual fall NCEL meetings in Washington, D.C., the National Chief Nursing Officer Summit in California, and an environmental health conference sponsored by the Pennsylvania State Nurses Association. After ANA's decision to sign onto the national Campaign for Safe Cosmetics, a major theme for ANA's booth at the annual 2007 legislative summit for the National Conference of State Legislators was to educate attendees about companies that have committed to replacing or removing known toxins from personal care products, as well as discussion of supportive state legislation. During this event, ANA staff spoke with approximately 400 legislators and staff, including nine nurse legislators. The opening of the annual ANA/CMA Lobbyist meeting in Washington, D.C. began with an environmental health-themed reception, during which attendees received an update on chemicals policy reform initiatives.

The work continues. ANA and NCEL will cosponsor a chemicals policy reform briefing during the spring NCEL meeting in Washington, D.C. and are planning another event for the 2008 annual legislative summit in New Orleans. Four CMAs will receive mini-grants from ANA to further advance chemicals policy reform initiatives in their state.

ANA will continue to facilitate ongoing communication of strategies with CMAs and environmental coalition leadership to synchronize efforts across and within the targeted states. A recent meeting sponsored by the Connecticut Nurses Association (for which ANA provided funding for nurse participants from Delaware, Maine, and New York) showed the value of regional collaboration. Discussion ensued around toxic toy legislation recently passed in Washington state (Children's Safe Products Act HB2647) and awaiting the Governor's response. With pressure from the toy industry to veto sections of the bill, the Washington State Nurses Association and ANA (along with other coalitions) have appealed to the Governor to sign the bill in its entirety, as passed by the legislature.

Additional partnerships will be forged. Through a united voice from leading healthcare professionals, we can increase visibility of these issues and attain needed protections from toxic chemicals to help improve human health and the environment. ★

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