

Headlines from the Hill

The health case for toxic chemical policy reform

By Michelle Artz

RECENTLY, we have become increasingly aware of the potential risks posed by some of the chemicals in the products we use every day, and a few chemicals in particular have gotten a lot of attention. Consumers may be choosing baby bottles made without bisphenol A (see *Bisphenol A update* on page 44) or perhaps are looking for cosmetics that are paraben-free. But these are just the chemicals we *know* about—the ones that are in the news. What about all the others that haven't made the headlines?

The surprising truth is that under current U.S. law, chemicals are allowed to enter our homes, workplaces, and communities with little or no testing for human toxicity. Consumers and workers are not informed about harmful chemicals in products and equipment they use at home and on the job, and there is no 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.

There is growing consensus that the Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA), enacted by the U.S. Congress in 1976 to regulate the use of chemicals based on their risk to human health or the environment, is failing to protect Americans from toxic chemicals. In the 34 years since TSCA was enacted, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has been able to require testing on just 200 of the more than 80,000 chemicals produced and used in this country, and just five chemicals have been regulated under this law.

On January 21, ANA joined its partners in the Safer Chemicals, Healthy Families (SCHF) coalition to release a new report, "The Health Case for Reforming the Toxic Substances Control Act." The report makes the case for chemical policy reform that can improve health and lower our nation's healthcare costs. According to the findings, "if TSCA reform leads to reductions in toxic chemical exposures that translate into just a tenth of one percent reduction in healthcare costs, the U.S. healthcare system will save at least \$5 billion every year." And the improvement we could all see in our

health and quality of life would be immeasurable.

Today, we have a much better understanding of how the chemicals in everyday products affect our health and environment. Studies continue to demonstrate the links between toxic chemicals and serious illnesses, such as cancer, reproductive disorders, developmental disorders, and asthma. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 133 million people in the U.S.—almost half of all Americans—are now living with these and other chronic diseases and conditions, which now account for 70% of deaths and 75% of U.S. healthcare costs.

Because of the many chemicals nurses and other healthcare workers are exposed to in the workplace, they are at even higher risk. ANA, along with Health Care Without Harm and Physicians for Social Responsibility, released a first-of-its-kind biomonitoring study of physicians and nurses last October. The inquiry found that all 20 participants had toxic chemicals associated with health care in their bodies. Each participant had at least 24 individual chemicals present, four of which are on the recently released EPA list of priority chemicals for regulation. These chemicals are all associated with chronic illness and physical disorders.

Introduction of a federal TSCA legislation bill is expected this year, and given recent publicity on the issue and the administration's new dedication to reform, we believe hope for change has never been more real. As a member of SCHF, ANA will fight for swift, meaningful TSCA reform that will reduce our exposure to toxic chemicals, improve the health of American residents, and decrease the cost of health care. We hope nurses across the country will join us in the fight. Watch www.rnaction.org for news on how to get involved, or email us at gova@ana.org. The full "The Health Case for Reforming the Toxic Substances Control Act" report is available at <http://healthreport.saferchemicals.org>. ★

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