US must strengthen efforts to restrict chemicals that threaten health, say researchers

EurekAlert

Bethesda, MD?With growing evidence of the link between exposure to toxic chemicals and chronic diseases, especially in children, the United States needs to step up its efforts to protect the public from hazardous chemicals, say researchers writing in the May issue of *Health Affairs*. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), stymied by the outdated Toxic Substances Control Act, must seek partners in academia to help evaluate the risks of industrial chemicals on the market today, say Sarah A. Vogel of the Johnson Family Foundation and Jody Roberts of the Chemical Heritage Foundation.

Some 83,000 chemicals are on the market, and under the 1976 law, companies do not have to prove their chemicals are safe. Instead, the federal government must prove whether a chemical is dangerous. This provision keeps potentially harmful chemicals on the market, increasing the risk to human health. Furthermore, the process required by the law to identify and control hazardous chemicals requires an extensive process of collecting, analyzing and evaluating data. This process consumes considerable government time and resources and acts as a roadblock to efforts to manage chemical risks and protect the public's health, according to the authors.

"In the thirty-five years since the Toxic Substances Control Act was enacted, we've learned much more about the harms of everyday chemical exposure and its contribution to a growing number of chronic diseases such as reproductive disorders, learning and behavioral disabilities, and diabetes," says Vogel. "Yet the EPA has had a nearly impossible time regulating the use of hazardous chemicals, such as asbestos, because it is hindered by the very high burden of proof that falls on the agency," she adds.

With reforms to the Toxic Substances Control Act uncertain, given the current political and budgetary climate, the EPA must look beyond Washington to strengthen its oversight of chemicals and accelerate efforts to reduce exposures to those chemicals that might contribute to poor health, say the authors. They propose that the EPA partner with academic institutions and professional societies to test and evaluate the risks of high-priority chemicals?including those that are produced in the greatest quantities, are commonly found in the human body, and that pose a potential risk to children's health and development.

According to the authors, these partners can generate independent analyses by using clearly defined and transparent evaluative standards and controlling for conflicts of interest. Building such partnerships will also strengthen the EPA's existing programs and better position it for any transitions that may come with changes to the Toxic Substances Control Act, they add. In April, a bill was

introduced in the US Senate that would reform the country's chemical policy and align the United States more closely with changes in Europe. The bill would require chemical producers to submit safety data for all chemicals, new and existing, and prioritize substances of concern for review and risk management. Many states have already taken steps to limit the market for hazardous chemicals, such as restricting lead in toys and bisphenol A (BPA) in baby bottles.

Vogel also says public health officials can do more to address environmental conditions as they work to reduce chronic disease and should join with other stakeholders in calling for chemical policy reforms.

A second Health Affairs article examines the impact of toxic chemicals on children's health and supports Vogel and Roberts' calls for reforms to the Toxic Substance Control Act to improve health and reduce health care costs.

Because children are uniquely vulnerable to toxic chemicals in the environment, the United States should have a more explicit chemical policy to protect them against disease and dysfunction, say Philip Landrigan at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine and Lynn Goldman, dean of The George Washington University's School of Public Health. Landrigan, one of the nation's foremost experts on the link between environment and children's health, examines how toxic chemicals are strongly linked to diseases in children such as asthma, mental retardation, and cancer, and how preventing them can yield billions of dollars in savings and increase productivity.

To reduce this preventable disease burden, Landrigan and Goldman suggest a fundamental overhaul of current policy that would include a legally mandated requirement to test the chemicals already on the market for toxicity and stepped-up research to both identify new toxins and document the environmentally induced diseases in children.

SOURCE [1]

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