

The polluted debate on bisphenol A

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Just last week, the Prime Minister and Health Minister Tony Clement were announcing new legislation to keep us all safe from consumer worries. Today, Mr. Clement is due to demonstrate one of the many, many reasons why this is not quite as easy as it sounds. Health Canada is due to announce its findings on the dangers (or not) attached to a batch of chemicals under its larger program of vetting prominent compounds.

Scientific ignorance, chemical phobia, and the sheer size of the chemical industry have made chemicals an area rich for environmental activism. This in turn makes their regulation a political GM potato.

The focus of concern, activism and media crusading is a chemical compound known as bisphenol A, or BPA. The communications challenge of Health Canada is to explain that this compound, which is contained in a large number of consumer products, including plastic baby bottles, food containers, and CDs can be dangerous, but isn't at the concentrations we, or our children, are ever likely to encounter.

All chemicals are toxic in sufficient concentrations. Most foods contain low levels of toxic chemicals. You can die from overdosing on water. Similarly, BPA is a hormone disruptor at sufficient concentrations. The point is whether such concentrations are likely to leach from consumer products. The answer, as indicated by numerous studies, and supported by most governments, is "no."

However, according to a piece earlier this week by *The Globe and Mail's* environmental frightmeister Martin Mittelstaedt, "Health Canada is calling bisphenol A a dangerous substance, making it the first regulatory body in the world to reach such a determination and taking the initial step toward measures to control exposures to it." He went on to note, however, that it wasn't dangerous enough for Ottawa to announce "specific bans or restrictions." Sounds like a pretty weird definition of "dangerous."

Mr. Mittelstaedt, who has been on a personal crusade against BPA for years, is already believed to have had some influence in Health Canada. Last year, apparently at least partly due to his inquiries, the senior Health Canada

researcher in charge of studying BPA was investigated for "bias" because he suggested that BPA was no more dangerous than tofu (unless presumably you tried to eat 300 pounds of it at a sitting). The official was subsequently relocated and is now on sabbatical.

The most amazing aspect of this affair is what BPA hysteria has done to the marketplace. This week, Hudson's Bay Co., Canadian Tire and Forzani all announced they were removing products containing BPA from their shelves. Lululemon and Mountain Equipment Co-op had already -- in line with their ultra green image--excised BPA products.

According to a story in yesterday's Globe by Mr. Mittelstaedt, "Dozens of studies by independent researchers have linked low exposure to BPA in animal and test-tube experiments to illnesses, such as cancer, that are thought to have an origin in hormone imbalances, although industry-funded studies haven't been able to find the same effects."

Get that not-so-subtle implication? "Independent" researchers find cancer. The industry doesn't. Draw your own conclusions.

But where are these "dozens of studies," and who did them? And why have they been universally rejected so far by governments, who, while perpetually keen to cover up their own wrongdoings (see the Newfoundland cancer screening cock/ cover-up), have no compunction about trumpeting any prospective error by industry?

Steve Milloy, editor of the Junk Science Web site, noted three years ago that government scientific review panels from the United States, the European Union and Japan had all looked at BPA data and found no "detectable risk of harm." The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has said that it saw no reason to restrict the use of BPA. However, this week the U.S. National Toxicology Center, part of the National Institutes of Health, released a report which suggested that that even low levels of exposure could cause tissue changes which might lead to cancer. But again, the crucial issue is how low? Significantly, this new report followed studies from the same organization last year that suggested that there were no realistic risks attached to BPA. These reports were met by considerable opposition from environmentalists and posturing puppet politicians, on the grounds that statistical data came from companies (who would of course be prosecuted if

they didn't provide it). Earlier this year Health Canada's consumer product safety division sent out a letter saying that BPA appeared not to "present a risk to Canadian children." The division then withdrew the letter.

Mr. Mittelstaedt seems to base his crusade primarily on the work of one activist/scientist, Frederick vom Saal, who has been criticized for doing/citing studies that cannot be reproduced. He also draws support from Rick Smith, executive director of Environmental Defence, an organization that produces reports with titles such as: Polluted Children, Toxic Nation. According to Mr. Smith, "Bisphenol A is in every Canadian home. It threatens the health of every Canadian. Moving against it would be a hugely significant victory for public health and the environment. ? If this chemical is listed as toxic, it will be an internationally significant decision."

Significant primarily for indicating the frightening power of activist "scientists," alarmist NGOs, and crusading journalists to pollute sensible public debate on important issues.