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OP-ED COLUMNIST

New Alarm Bells About Chemicals and Cancer

By [NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF](#)

The President's Cancer Panel is the Mount Everest of the medical mainstream, so it is astonishing to learn that it is poised to join ranks with the organic food movement and declare: chemicals threaten our bodies.

The [cancer panel](#) is releasing a landmark 200-page report on Thursday, warning that our lackadaisical approach to regulation may have far-reaching consequences for our health.

I've read an advance copy of the report, and it's an extraordinary document. It calls on America to rethink the way we confront cancer, including much more rigorous regulation of chemicals.

Traditionally, we reduce cancer risks through regular doctor visits, self-examinations and screenings such as mammograms. The President's Cancer Panel suggests other eye-opening steps as well, such as giving preference to organic food, checking radon levels in the home and microwaving food in glass containers rather than plastic.

In particular, the report warns about exposures to chemicals during pregnancy, when risk of damage seems to be greatest. Noting that 300 contaminants have been detected in umbilical cord blood of newborn babies, the study warns that: "to a disturbing extent, babies are born 'pre-polluted.' "

It's striking that this report emerges not from the fringe but from the mission control of mainstream scientific and medical thinking, the President's Cancer Panel. Established in 1971, this is a group of three distinguished experts who review America's cancer program and report directly to the president.

One of the seats is now vacant, but the panel members who joined in this report are Dr. LaSalle Leffall Jr., an oncologist and professor of surgery at Howard University, and Dr. Margaret Kripke, an immunologist at the M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston. Both were originally appointed to the panel by former President George W. Bush.

"We wanted to let people know that we're concerned, and that they should be concerned,"

Professor Leffall told me.

The report blames weak laws, lax enforcement and fragmented authority, as well as the existing regulatory presumption that chemicals are safe unless strong evidence emerges to the contrary.

“Only a few hundred of the more than 80,000 chemicals in use in the United States have been tested for safety,” the report says. It adds: “Many known or suspected carcinogens are completely unregulated.”

Industry may howl. The food industry has already been fighting [legislation in the Senate backed by Dianne Feinstein of California](#) that would ban bisphenol-A, commonly found in plastics and [better known as BPA](#), from food and beverage containers.

Studies of BPA have raised alarm bells for decades, and the evidence is still complex and open to debate. That’s life: In the real world, regulatory decisions usually must be made with ambiguous and conflicting data. The panel’s point is that we should be prudent in such situations, rather than recklessly approving chemicals of uncertain effect.

The President’s Cancer Panel report will give a boost to Senator Feinstein’s efforts. It may also help the prospects of [the Safe Chemicals Act](#), backed by Senator Frank Lautenberg and several colleagues, to improve the safety of chemicals on the market.

Some 41 percent of Americans will be diagnosed with cancer at some point in their lives, and they include Democrats and Republicans alike. Protecting ourselves and our children from toxins should be an effort that both parties can get behind — if enough members of Congress are willing to put the public interest ahead of corporate interests.

One reason for concern is that some cancers are becoming more common, particularly in children. We don’t know why that is, but the proliferation of chemicals in water, foods, air and household products is widely suspected as a factor. I’m hoping the President’s Cancer Panel report will shine a stronger spotlight on environmental causes of health problems — not only cancer, but perhaps also diabetes, obesity and autism.

This is not to say that chemicals are evil, and in many cases the evidence against a particular substance is balanced by other studies that are exonerating. To help people manage the uncertainty prudently, the report has a section of recommendations for individuals:

¶Particularly when pregnant and when children are small, choose foods, toys and garden products with fewer endocrine disruptors or other toxins. (Information about products is at www.cosmeticsdatabase.com or www.healthystuff.org.)

¶For those whose jobs may expose them to chemicals, remove shoes when entering the house and

wash work clothes separately from the rest of the laundry.

¶Filter drinking water.

¶Store water in glass or stainless steel containers, or in plastics that don't contain BPA or [phthalates](#) (chemicals used to soften plastics). Microwave food in ceramic or glass containers.

¶Give preference to food grown without pesticides, chemical fertilizers and growth hormones. Avoid meats that are cooked well-done.

¶Check radon levels in your home. Radon is a natural source of radiation linked to cancer.

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