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GUEST VIEWPOINT: State's response to child's positive pesticide test: Don't worry

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What if our government knew that a threat to human safety existed in Lane County? Would we expect it to take action to protect us?

Our state and federal governments recently informed dozens of Lane County residents that poisonous pesticides have been found in their bodies.

On Dec. 15, the Oregon Health Authority and the federal Centers for Disease Control told a mother in Lane County that test results show residues of 2,4-D, a powerful pesticide, in urine samples drawn from her and her children (as well as dozens of other members of her rural community). The samples were taken in response to reports that families have been sickened from exposure to pesticides sprayed by helicopter over hundreds of acres of forest land. These industrial chemicals are sprayed by timber companies attempting to kill grass and brush.

That mother was told she need not worry that her children are carrying 2,4-D in their bodies, because it is becoming more common to find 2,4-D residues in urine samples across the United States.

It may appear at first glance that having 2,4-D in a flask of a child's urine on a lab bench is not such a big deal. However, to a mother who gets that report about her child, it is disturbing.

And it should be disturbing. She knows the contents of the flask are the endpoint of the pesticides that are inside her child's bladder, after the kidneys have filtered it from the blood. Upstream from there, those pesticides circulated in the child's bloodstream, bathing every cell with some quantity of pesticide.

She knows, and research confirms, that children are much more vulnerable to harm from pesticides than adults. Such harm may come in the form of learning disabilities, reproductive disorders or cancer later in their lives.

Yet government agents had the audacity to tell a mother that it is not worrisome, because other people also have 2,4-D in their bloodstreams.

A government's most fundamental responsibility is to protect its citizens from physical harm. A case in point is the medical and economic history of lead.

Lead used to be ubiquitous in gasoline and paints until it was discovered that children were

suffering irreparable neurologic harm from lead exposure. At first, government agencies told parents not to worry. Since then, though, lead has been banned in consumer products and society rightly has declared a policy of zero tolerance for lead poisoning in children.

Not unlike the story of lead in gasoline, Lane County timber companies broadcast pesticides over thousands of acres of land until they are omnipresent in the environment. Pesticides are sprayed by helicopter, just as the military used Agent Orange to defoliate jungles in Vietnam. These dangerous chemicals travel far from where they are sprayed, eventually falling over rivers, homes and schools and exposing families through contaminated air and water.

When government agencies announced they would conduct testing of atrazine and 2,4-D in the fall of 2011, a group of Lane County timber companies cleverly decided simply to not use these two chemicals during the testing period. By choosing not to spray those particular pesticides this year, timber corporations conceded that detectable levels would show up in people's bodies, presenting a difficult public relations problem.

Despite the timber companies' efforts to thwart the study, though, the government's new test results prove that these herbicides are still in people's bodies — even a child's body. Even the Environmental Protection Agency does not know if there are "safe" levels in humans. The International Agency for Research on Cancer considers 2,4-D as possibly carcinogenic to humans.

But here in Oregon, mothers are told not to worry that 2,4-D is circulating in their children's bodies. Health authorities, who should put health protection first, told this mother, "These exposures are occurring as a result of ... economic conditions under which our present world is defined." Mothers may ask: Does that trump the fundamental right of all children to live in a healthy environment?

In promoting the economic interests of a highly influential and powerful fraternity of timber corporations, policymakers and health officials are acting without consideration for that child with 2,4-D in his bloodstream. To them, that child is merely a data point, a victim of legalized poisoning.

All manner of medical evidence suggests that pesticides constitute a threat to human health. We need our state government to build the political will to prevent this harm.

Mothers, for eons, have told their children, "I don't care if everyone else is doing it; it is still wrong. Never forget: Our family takes the path of ethical behavior."

Our state agencies should listen to their mothers.

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