Subject: Chemical Pollutants Likely Culprits In Rising Birth Defects
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Chemical Pollutants Likely Culprits In Rising Birth Defects

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Chemical pollutants likely culprits in rising birth defects

COMPASS: Other points of view

By ROXANNE CHAN and SARAH PETRAS

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As public health professionals, we are concerned about the high rates of birth defects in Alaska and possible links to environmental contaminants. As reported last month in the Daily News, the fact that "Alaska infants are twice as likely to be born with major birth defects as infants in the U.S. as a whole" cannot be explained simply by cigarette smoking, alcohol consumption, maternal age and diet. The article did not discuss the growing body of scientific evidence that suggests environmental contaminants are linked to birth defects and other harmful reproductive health effects in both males and females.

Though many people think of Alaska as pristine, Alaska has over 2,000 toxic waste sites. They include over 700 formerly used military defense sites, countless open dump sites throughout rural Alaska, and five major military sites that are designated among the most hazardous sites in the country (known as Superfund sites) -- two of which are in Anchorage. These sites contain hazardous materials that are linked to a range of adverse health effects, including birth defects.

Alaska and the circumpolar Arctic are also subject to pesticides and industrial chemicals that originate from thousands of miles away, traveling northward via oceanic and atmospheric currents and eventually settling in cold climates. These chemicals accrue in the north because the cold climate and fat-based food web favor retention of these persistent toxics.

Even toxic chemicals that have been banned in the U.S. (such as the insecticide DDT and class of industrial chemicals known as PCBs) continue to accumulate in the Arctic and sub-Arctic. Contaminants threaten the health of northern peoples who rely on traditional diets of fish and marine mammals.
Research demonstrates that industrial chemicals, pollutants, and pesticides cross the placenta as readily as residues from cigarettes and alcohol.

A review of scientific studies revealed contaminants such as solvents, heavy metals, and pesticides are linked to birth defects such as heart abnormalities, oral clefts (lip and/or palate) and neural tube defects (incomplete development of the brain, spinal cord and/or protective coverings of these organs).

Exposure to plasticizers (used in consumer products) is linked to feminization of baby boys. PCBs and fine particulate matter are linked to low birth weight. A recent study in Alaska found that women from villages with "hazardous" open dump sites were more likely to deliver preterm or low birth weight babies.

High levels of man-made chemicals in the blood of pregnant women may also contribute to the newly discovered gender imbalance in the Arctic. Nationwide, the number of males being born is declining. Twice as many girls than boys are born in some Arctic villages in Greenland and Russia, and in some Greenland villages near the Thule American military base no boys are being born at all.

We call upon Governor Palin and our public agencies to protect public health by:

• Phasing out persistent, bio-accumulative chemicals, especially those that cause cancer, genetic harm, endocrine disorders, immune and neurological damage;

• Enacting laws that prevent the release of toxic chemicals from military and industrial sources;

• Establishing protective standards for environmental cleanup;

• Preventing the use of harmful pesticides in schools, hospitals, parks, and neighborhoods;

• Establishing purchasing policies that eliminate use of PVC plastics and chlorine-bleached paper; and

• Establishing bio-monitoring and health tracking systems.

To ensure the future health of Alaska's peoples and environment, it is imperative that we act now to prevent exposure to chemicals that harm the most vulnerable population -- developing children.

Roxanne Chan, RN, MS is on the board of Alaska Community Action on Toxics in Anchorage. Sarah Petras, MPH, is environmental health and justice organizer for the same group.
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