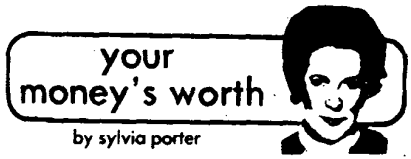
MONS 037186

MAR 24 1976

Toxin Debate: To Control Or Not?



ITEM: In industrial South Baltimore, health officials have closed Swann Park — where Al Kaline, Ron Swoboda and Reggie Jackson once hit the ball over the freight tracks and down toward the Patapaco River. The soil of the park, adjoining an Allied Chemical plant, is contaminated with Kepone, a toxic pesticide that, like DDT, decomposes very slowly into less harmful substances and builds up in living fatty tissues and the central nervous system.

ITEM: In Hopewell, Va., the Life Science Product Co.'s plant was closed last July because of the effects of Kepone on employes. Later, parts of the James River were closed to fishing; the water had been contaminated with Kepone from the Hopewell plant.

ITEM: Fishing has just been banned in the Hudson River. Bass found in the Hudson — and later to range the Atlantic from Delaware to Maine — were contaminated with PCB, a highly toxic vinyl chloride, originating at General Electric plants upriver.

ITEM: Dangerously high levels of arsenic also were reported recently in the soil of the R. H. Bogle Chemical Co. in Alexandria, Va., just across the Potomac from Washington, D.C. Officials ordered the site fenced. A filtering system was being installed to prevent arsenic particles from entering the Potomac in rainwater run-off, when high mercury contamination also was discovered.

In communities across the land, startling and scary incidents such as these are taking place. And while federal, state and local officials are more aggressive than ever in uncovering hazardous conditions and acting to eliminate them, new chemicals are constantly emerging from the nation's laboratories to create new dangers and damages to living people and to the genes they will pass on to generations unborn.

Yet, for more than five years, a bill that would require industry to test possibly hazardous chemicals before they are placed on he market has been before Congress — and twice the bill has come close to beingenacted.

Lined up against the measure, though, have been the chemical companies which object strongly to the additional costs of this testing. These costs, they insist, would have to be passed on to us in the form of higher prices for products we buy — a potent argument indeed during the galloping inflation years of the 1970s.

But lined up in favor of the legislation (called the Toxic Substances Control Act) are concerned organizations such as environmental, consumer, labor groups; health-oriented associations, such as the Blue Cross Assn., American Lung Assn., March of Dimes; and new support for the bill is mounting as newspaper headlines report the horror tales about chemical threats to life.

For while the costs and burdens of pre-testing cannot be downgraded, neither can the costs and tragic suffering resulting from chemical contamination. From 60 to 90 per cent of all cancers are linked to exposure to chemical and other man-produced environmental factors. Even now, cancer costs the U.S. over $15 billion annually. Of the more than 200,000 infants born with physical or mental damage each year, about 40,000 (20 per cent) are suffering from defects attributed to drugs, radiation and chemicals.

The lifetime medical bills of these children alone will be staggering. Then add to this the costs for treatment of the 25 per cent of our population who will develop some form of cancer.

The Toxic Substances Control Act is designed to get at the heart of our chemical contamination problem via pre-testing and stiffer regulation of production, marketing, use or disposal of hazardous chemicals. There also are incentives in the proposed law for companies to seek out safety hazards in chemicals, to develop safer products and to find cheaper testing methods.

There even may be savings to the companies to help balance the costs of testing. Several paper companies have found that pressures to cut down on water pollution and eliminate odors have led to new technologies which also save millions annually in water, chemical and energy costs.

The Senate Commerce Committee has approved S-3149 — and the toxic substances bill is heading for a vote before the entire Senate. As Blue Cross president Walter J. McNerney says:

"Our health system should not be just a repair program. If we ignore the damage to health caused by environmental and occupational factors, the major thrust of our health programs will be only to continue to repair the damage these factors do to human machinery."

Copyright 1976 Field Enterprises, Inc