Chemicals in the Environment

First it was the pesticides that caused alarm when it was discovered that such insect killers as DDT persisted in the environment, accumulating in the tissues of tiny organisms, then in the flesh of fish and fish-eaters, finally reaching man himself.

Then it was discovered that toxic metals such as mercury and cadmium, when released into the environment, also accumulated in the tissues of organisms in nature, and man.

Health and environmental experts are still groping for the solution to these problems and are now hit with another one. Undoubtedly there will be more.

The new problem is a class of industrial chemicals known as polychlorinated biphenyls—PCBs for short.

They are closely related to DDT in chemical structure and show similar characteristics when released into the environment. PCBs are used in heat transfer systems, as insulating fluids, and in some paint and pesticide products.

Apparently not much is known about their toxic effects. But PCBs are showing up in the environment, and in poultry, eggs and fish. Foods with high concentrations are being withdrawn from the market. "We want PCB out of the food supply, but we don't yet regard it as an imminent hazard to health," said James D. Grant, deputy commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration.

Said Dr. Robert Risebrough of the University of California at Berkeley, an expert on the chemical:

"There is no evidence that PCBs in the environment are likely to reach levels which would cause severe injury or death from short-term exposure. The possible PCB hazard, like so many environmental hazards, is one of long-term, low-level exposure and perhaps of effects from its combination with other poisons."

A multi-agency federal task force has been set up to study the PCB problem. It will want to find out how PCB is getting into the environment, assess its hazards, and determine what to do about it. It will be dealing with a problem that has already developed, though only recently has it been recognized as a problem. PCBs have been around for 40 years but only in the last two or three years has it been detected in the environment.

It would be far better to anticipate such environmental problems before they develop. Thousands of new chemical compounds are put into use each year, according to William D. Ruckelshaus, chief of the Environmental Protection Agency. They should be tested for their toxic and environmental effects before they are put into use.

A toxic substance bill proposed by the Nixon administration would make this requirement. It should be passed immediately.

CLEVELAND PLAIN DEALER

No School Prayer

The "crusade" in the U.S. House of Representatives for a constitutional amendment to permit prayers in the public schools is unwise.

Under the U.S. Constitution, a person can pray or not pray, practice his religion as he wants, be atheistic or agnostic. Under this proposal, unhappily sponsored by an Ohioan, to take the matter directly to a floor vote, the majority would be attempting to make the minority conform. "Nondenominational" prayer cannot be defined for one who does not want to pray at all. The school child who would decline to pray might be scorned.

Respect for religious liberty is one of the things that made America great.



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