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A Plague of Chemicals

Science, which has gone so far toward ridding the world of devastating disease, may now just as effectively be visiting upon us a new, equally potent scourge. Something like 30,000 chemicals are on the American market today, and only a tiny fraction of them have been analyzed for harmful effects.

A good case in point are the PCBs, described as "a class of colorless, tasteless chlorinated hydrocarbon similar to the pesticide DDT." Between 1929, when PCBs were introduced by Monsanto, the sole producer, and 1971, the compounds found their way into a broad assortment of products, ranging from brake fluid to carbon paper and soap. Forty years after PCBs hit the market, evidence of their danger finally prompted Monsanto to limit sales to customers using them in "closed systems," such as electrical insulation. By then, the persistent compounds were everywhere. They have been found in the snow at the North Pole and in fish taken from the Yukon River.

Finally, last fall, enactment of the Toxic Substances Act banned manufacture of PCBs after 1978. There is convincing evidence that they cause cancers, stillbirths, miscarriages and "various metabolic disorders." No one knows what to do about the PCBs already in circulation, in the food chain and accumulating in human tissue. PCBs from a Westinghouse plant near Bloomington, Ind., have entered that area's rivers and streams and ruined an important recreation industry. They have infected the city's sewage sludge, which was innocently used as farm fertilizer. Backyard vegetables, beef and

dairy products contain dangerous levels of PCB.

Incredibly, even belated knowledge of the dangers of PCBs and their ilk is not enough. Earlier this month, a contractor came within an inch of spraying Iowa's dusty country roads with enough PCB to kill or sicken every man, woman and child in that state. Ten thousand gallons of the stuff had been picked up "by mistake" by a truck driver who thought he was loading up with crankcase drainings.

Experience was little help to Michigan dairy farmers who lost their herds two years ago when a toxic fire-retardant chemical was "accidentally" mixed into cattle feed. Now, they are slaughtering their new herds because they are contaminated with yet another chemical, a preservative the animals apparently ingested by licking barn wood.

Clearly, our collective survival depends on more than just greater vigilance. We must abandon immediately the free-wheeling system under which a company may put questionable chemicals into the environment willy-nilly until the federal government completes the cumbersome process leading to restriction. In the face of chemical proliferation, we must raise a stiff set of obstacles that go far beyond mere proof of usefulness. Before a new chemical compound can be marketed, we should require not only conclusive proof of its safety, but proof that it is needed. Only when the sheer numbers of different compounds are reduced will it become possible to determine if those that remain are safe. We must begin with the presumption that the world does not need another chemical.