D. K. Bishop

HEW Panel on PCBs Hit For 'Misleading' Mothers

By Morton Mintz
Washington Post Staff Writer

A panel of federal and private health specialists has been accused of being "very misleading" in concluding that mothers can continue to breast-feed their babies despite contamination of their milk by toxic industrial chemicals called PCBs.

The Department of Health, Education, and Welfare Committee to Coordinate Toxicology on PCBs in Mothers' Milk "failed to adequately deal with the issue" at a meeting here on Sept. 23, according to a joint statement Saturday by Dr. Joseph Highland of the Environmental Defense Fund and Stephanie Harris of the Health Research Group.

PCBs, which concentrate in fatty tissue and remain there for years, first came into wide use in the 1930s, mainly in electrical equipment. Not until the mid-1960s did researchers discover that PCBs—polychlorinated biphenyls—had contaminated the air, water and soil of all industrialized countries. Last week, Monsanto Chemical Co., the only American manufacturer, announced that it was ending production.

HEW convened the committee after the Environmental Protection Agency reported finding PCBs in 79 of 80 samples of milk fat from mothers in 11 states.

The average concentration was 1.8 parts per million (ppm). In baby rhesus monkeys nursed by their mothers with milk contaminated by as little as 4 to 6 ppm, skin discoloration and other adverse effects occurred. The babies improved when weaned, but behavioral and learning deficiencies persisted for at least a year.

Because of this finding, made by University of Wisconsin pathologist James R. Allen, the HEW committee urged immediate studies to determine, among other things, whether PCBs can cause learning disabilities or hyperactivity in breast-fed babies.

In a letter to HEW Secretary David Mathews, Highland and Harris objected to the composition of the committee, saying it was labeled "expert" but included pediatricians and others who are not expert in the toxicity of PCBs or chemicals generally. They also protested "the lack of opportunity for discussion" by members of the public at the committee meeting.

The non-profit organization representatives also made these points:

• The committee's conclusions were those "of the chairman alone," did not have "affirmative support" from committee members and consequently should not be ranked as official government recommendations.

• Although several federal officials on the committee advised women who are or might someday be pregnant not to eat game fish identified as PCB carriers, the committee ignored a Fish and Wildlife Service official in the audience whose data indicated "the widespread incidence of PCBs in all fresh-water fish."

• Because the data on breast-feeding with PCB-contaminated milk are too sparse to permit accurate measurement of benefits and risks, the committee "could not" have given sound advice and should not have taken a position.

Fruit Smugglers Chided

Agence France-Presse

MOSCOW, Oct. 10—The Georgian Republic's Communist Party has called for a sharper crackdown on speculators who smuggle fruit and vegetables out of the republic to sell them for high prices in Moscow and other northern cities.



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