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PCB and the FDA

Last June, the Food and Drug Administration found potentially dangerous concentrations of the industrial chemical polychlorinated dithenyl in a variety of dried food products, including some baby cereals. No public announcement of the discovery was made until this month, when it was revealed by Representative William F. Ryan.

Ryan couped his revelation with a castigation of the FDA for showing "more concern about the image of American industry, rather than the public." The Congressman has a point.

In defense of the FDA, it should be noted that the problem was not simply overlooked. The probable source is identified as the printing ink used in recycled paper in which the foods were packaged; since June, PCB has been removed from printing ink. The FDA then

had solved the problem for the future, so why risk a public slap and the possibility of lasting damage to consumer confidence in the suspect food stuffs?

So there was some logic in the FDA's silence, but not enough to justify it. The FDA did find PCB in amounts that it has labeled unacceptable in other foods. PCB, a chemical cousin of DDT, has been implicated in human death and disability. The only valid action under the circumstances was a full public disclosure of the facts in its possession without consideration for the reputation or the financial health of the packagers.

The FDA is mistaken in its evident belief that the public is prepared to panic at the mention of tainted food. And the public should be able to expect the unadulterated truth from agencies established for public protection.