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New policy set up to identify carcinogens

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BERKELEY — State health officials said Wednesday that they will establish a new program for identifying cancer-causing chemicals because the federal government "is requiring a human body count" before it will control such substances.

Health services director Beverlee Myers said the program will rely on animal tests to identify probable carcinogens. She said this contrasts with a federal policy that "requires evidence of human health effects, rather than animal health effects alone, before a substance is to be considered a carcinogen."

Henceforth, she said her agency will consider a chemical to be capable of causing cancer in humans if it found to be carcinogenic in a single test with animals.

Myers said this step is the first part of a three-phase process for formulating a state cancer policy. She said the next phase involves assessing the relative dangers of chemicals that have been branded as cancer-causing agents.

To do this, she said will appoint an advisory group that includes representatives from labor, industry, state agencies and the general public.

The third phase will involve the development of any new regulations or controls of carcinogens that may be needed, Myers said.

The state will consider a chemical to be capable of causing cancer in humans if it found to be carcinogenic in a test with animals.

She said she expects the entire process to be completed by the end of the year.

According to Kim Hooper, chief of the state Hazard Evaluation System and Information Service, few of the 50,000 chemicals used in the United States have been tested for their cancer-causing ability.

Hooper appeared at a press briefing with Myers and three other officials, including Donald Vial, director of the Department of Industrial Relations. Hooper said perhaps 5 to 10 percent of the chemicals in use cause cancer.

A 69-page report released by Myers lists dozens of chemicals for which it says there is "sufficient evidence of carcinogenicity" in experiments with animals.

Among the chemicals are chloroform, ethylene dibromide (EDB), polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) and DBCP, which was banned in California in 1977 after it was found to cause cancer in animals and sterility in human males.

"This is not a regulatory document," Myers said of the report. "It is the scientific basis" for future regulatory policy.

Hooper said the new program is intended to prevent tragedies such as what happened to men who packaged DBCP at the Occidental Chemical Co. plant in Lathrop. Tests conducted five years ago on 114 workers showed that one-third had become sterile as a result of DBCP exposure.

The men, Hooper said, "were made sterile by a chemical for which we had animal data 18 years earlier."

A recent state study found an apparent link between DBCP in drinking water and increased rates of stomach cancer and lymphoid leukemia in residents of Fresno County.

According to state health official Robert Stephens, those findings have been "seriously criticized by senior U.S. Environmental Protection Agency officials, in part due to the state's presumption of human carcinogenicity based on animal data."

The new cancer program was criticized by John Yewell, a lobbyist for the California Chamber of Commerce. Yewell said members of his organization feel the policy focuses too much on industrial chemicals, which he called a "very small part" of the cancer problem.

He said most cancers are the result of other elements in people's lives, such as smoking and diet.

Yewell said Myers' report overstates the degree to which scientists agree on what substances cause cancer. "There's not a consensus as the report states," he said.

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