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Panel disagrees with government on PCBs

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WASHINGTON — 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 a toxic industrial chemical called PCBs.

The Department of Health, Education, and Welfare Committee to Coordinate Technology on PCBs in Mothers' Milk [illegible] to adequately deal with the [illegible] at a meeting here on Sept. 21, 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, [illegible] that it was ending production.

HEW convened the committee after the Environmental Protection Agency reported finding PCBs in 70 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 the harm possibly caused by PCBs to breast-fed babies includes learning disabilities or hyperactivity.

In a letter to HEW Secretary David Mathews, Highland and Harris objected to the composition of the committee, saying it was intended "expert" but included pediatricians and others expert in the toxicity neither of PCBs nor of 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 in weight remedy by pregnant not to eat sport 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.

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