

Calculating the cost of caution

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Last December, the European Commission adopted measures to ban phthalate softeners from PVC toys and teething rings. This emergency ban will apply until this month, by which time it is intended that legislation will be in place to confirm it in the long term.

The move marks the culmination of a two-year campaign by environmentalists and consumer protection groups. But the ban is no more than a cowardly and rearguard attempt on the part of the Commission to legitimise its authority by appealing to consumers under the guise of protecting health.

Under the ban, PVC articles intended to be put in the mouths of children aged under three cannot contain more than 0.1% by weight of six phthalates. But the measures merely formalise a state of affairs already largely in existence. Manufacturers, retailers and trade associations, which had been systematically targeted by activists, had already introduced informal self-regulation. And eight EU member states had introduced their own restrictions on the production and sale of such items.

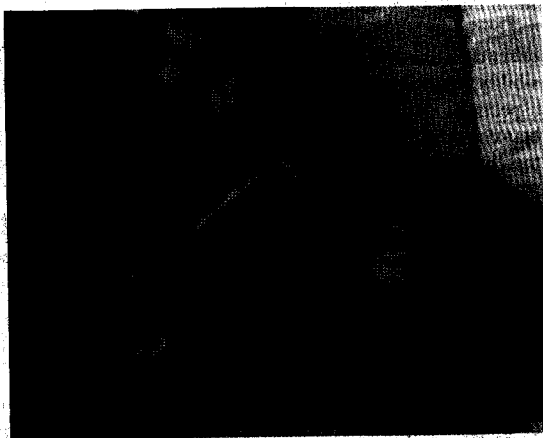
The suggestion by Commissioners David Byrne and Erkki Liikanen that 'phthalates pose a serious risk to human health' indicates a dishonest or self-deceiving loss of nerve. Phthalates are, from a health and environmental viewpoint, some of the most studied and understood organic compounds. They have been in widespread use for almost 50 years in products as common and diverse as children's toys; household and industrial items, such as cable coating, flooring and clothing; and medical devices, including blood-bags, catheter tubing and surgical gloves.

Was the Commission relying on a wealth of new and worrying toxicological evidence to justify its actions? Far from it. The latest research evidence, produced last autumn and eagerly awaited by campaigners, indicated that the possibility of a baby exceeding recommended limits through exposure to such products was 'so rare that the statistical likelihood cannot be estimated'.

In December, the US Consumer Product Safety Commission released its own study

which showed that 'the amount ingested does not even come close to a harmful level'. Even the chair of the European Commission's own Scientific Committee on Toxicity, Ecotoxicity and the Environment, Jim Bridges of the University of Surrey, has questioned the ban. 'I don't think the science is saying at all that there's an immediate risk,' he said.

Why then, despite the overwhelming evidence against claims of carcinogenic or reproductive effects in humans, have officials



Teething trouble: is the 'precautionary' approach justified?

in Europe and the US nevertheless recommended the removal of such products on a 'precautionary' basis?

Clearly Greenpeace, which orchestrated scare tactics and made inflammatory comments about 'corpses' and 'Russian roulette' played a central role. Campaigning against phthalates also fitted neatly into the group's longer-term campaign against PVC use in general. However, Greenpeace was ultimately no more than a messenger in a far broader process of social transformation which continually tends towards elevating fears and denigrating our achievements.

Research and reasoned opinion indicate little cause for concern, but actions taken and policies implemented assume the worst. This suggests that what has changed is not the evidence on which decisions are made, but rather the confidence of those making them.

In the aftermath of the 1996 BSE crisis, the European Commission directorate responsible for consumer policy and health protection issued a swathe of documents referring to the

need to adopt a 'precautionary' approach in all matters to do with food safety and public health. In effect, officials sought to deflect blame for their handling of the crisis by pointing to the fact that science can never provide definitive answers. But this is hardly a major new discovery, let alone one that deserves to be dressed up with the title 'precautionary principle'.

While it is widely recognised that the public no longer trusts state institutions and industry, what has been less debated is how these latter have allowed or encouraged the very rationality of science and objective enquiry to be drawn into question. The result has been to allow the irrational ideas of unaccountable environmentalist and consumer advocacy groups to resonate more widely.

By discovering risky products and activities everywhere, these groups seek to regulate human activity. Their campaigns take the form of radical critiques of business and government. But by encouraging the prioritisation of feeling and emotion over thinking and reason, they are a threat to all of us.

Such an approach has now allowed the Greenpeace-backed Health Care Without Harm (HCWH) group in the US to lobby for the removal of phthalate-containing soft PVC medical devices in hospitals. This is despite the fact that these products have performed vital, life-saving functions over billions of patient days of short- and long-term exposure.

Producers have now been placed on the defensive. Shareholder pressure, orchestrated by HCWH, is prompting them to investigate alternative products which are inevitably less well documented and less well understood. The inevitable logic of the 'precautionary' approach has already come to the fore: the fear of phthalates will simply be transferred to their proposed replacements.

In addition, bringing up a generation of people in fear of everyday products, questioning the ability of science to improve their lives, and hence doubting the desirability of innovation and change, has a social cost which has yet to be calculated.

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