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Stop using babies as lobbyists

Howard Mains, Financial Post

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Today in Ottawa, a select group of academic, government, industry and nongovernmental organizations representatives will meet to discuss communications issues around the public portrayal of bisphenol A and the urban use of pesticides.

Their objective is to build a better framework for "risk communications" when it comes to chemicals and our health. Having been at the centre of both of these public debates, I offer the following observations so that Canadians can be better informed of the risks chemicals pose, and do not pose, to their health.

To start, risk is defined as "the possibility of suffering loss or danger." And this possibility must always be put, and kept, in context. Risk is around us daily, whether it is falling in our morning shower or being struck by a bus on our way home. The difference between these risks and the "chemical phobia" that is the domain of communications efforts of many NGOs is the perception of what we actually control and fully comprehend.

This perceived lack of control is compounded by an understandable lack of scientific literacy among Canadians. Technology now allows the measurement of substances at parts per quadrillion. But what does this mean in communicating actual risk? Scientific findings, like risk itself, must be put and consistently kept in context. To this end, it is encouraging to see that Health Canada is following this practice in its recent communications under the Chemicals Management Plan.

For example, in addressing public concern about 1,4-dioxane, a chemical found in baby shampoo, Health Canada stated: "A person would have to apply shampoo to their hair more than 620 times a day, every day in order to reach potential levels of concern for 1,4-dioxane." In other words, lather, rinse and live your life.

Next, the benefits of a chemical product must be clearly communicated. Here again, Health Canada has improved its approach from the communications paralysis that initially afflicted the department during the bisphenol A communications debacle in April of 2008. A month later, common sense returned to the file with the government stating: "The current scientific evidence indicates that the general public need not be concerned as levels of BPA present in food do not pose a health risk. Epoxy resin can linings containing bisphenol A provide an important safety function by protecting the quality of food and beverages (i. e., prevents corrosion of the can material and prevents reactions between the food and the can material)."

Another area for improvement is language. All stakeholders must use clear and simple language. When it comes to communicating risk, language must foster comprehension and assurance, not

confusion and anxiety. With its decision on 2,4-D, a commonly used lawn pesticide, the federal government was unambiguous in its statement: "Health Canada has determined that 2,4-D meets Canada's strict health and safety standards, and as such can continue to be sold and used in Canada." With such a definitive statement by our regulator -- echoed by other regulators the world over -- the debate about 2,4-D, arguably the most studied chemical ever, should be put to bed.

Media organizations must also be more critical when reporting on studies, especially when NGOs continue to re-hash old studies. Time and time again I see references to old "shocking" or "alarming" articles or studies that a government regulator has already assessed and considered in arriving at a product safety decision.

And let's stop using babies as lobbyists. The authors of "Slow Death by Rubber Duck" boast how they've organized meetings and photo-ops with rent-a-crowd moms, strollers and of course, gurgling, crying and diaper wetting babies to influence politicians. These crass and cynical stunts have resulted in policy pronouncements based upon fear, guilt and the fact that the news cameras were dutifully rolling. And then, as the authors blatantly state: "Content with a good day's work, the babies went home for their afternoon naps."

Finally, we need to put industry and NGOs on a level playing field when it comes to science. Industry must comply with very precise and demanding standards when it comes to undertaking the scientific research required by government regulatory agencies. Scientific data submitted to Health Canada and other federal regulators must be done by Good Laboratory Practice (GLP) qualified laboratories.

An unintentional GLP violation can invalidate the study, requiring the study to be repeated, which is very costly. Under the Pest Control Products Act, intentionally misrepresenting the findings of a GLP study is a violation that upon conviction, can lead to a fine up to \$500,000 or a jail term of up to three years. Meanwhile, advocates in the NGO world typically rely on studies that are not subject to stringent GLP requirements or statutory sanction. It is time to end the double standard.

By following the suggestions above, all stakeholders -- industry, government, NGOs, academics and others -- would contribute to a more rational debate around risk communications for chemicals and our society would be better informed and served.

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