
RISKS FROM MAN-MADE CHEMICALS ARE INCREASINGLY PUTTING WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN DANGER

The use of man-made chemicals, such as pesticides, has increased substantially over the last several decades. Output of chemicals has increased from US \$171 billion in 1970 to US \$1503 billion in 1998, and will continue to grow over the next 20 years. Exposure to dangerous chemicals can lead to a range of consequences, from the development of cancer and chronic respiratory diseases, to death. The populations most vulnerable to health risks due to chemical exposures are the poor, in particular women and children. Workers and consumers are also at risk if not properly informed about chemical risks. The International Labour Organization estimates that occupational exposure to hazardous substances may be responsible for around 340,000 deaths per year globally. These deaths can be prevented.

There is an urgent need to find effective, low-cost means of reducing death and injury from unsafe chemical exposures, according to the Intergovernmental Forum on Chemical Safety. Over 600 leading international experts and officials from government, the private sector and non-governmental organizations are meeting this week in Bangkok with the aim of scaling up critical actions to protect vulnerable populations from chemical threats.

“Chemicals are necessary elements in everyday life, but to use them safely is essential for the well-being of millions of people and for protecting the environment in both the industrialized and developing world,” said Henrique Cavalcanti, President of the Intergovernmental Forum on Chemical Safety and former Minister of Environment and the Amazon, Brazil. “The Forum offers a unique opportunity for all its participants, public, private and international, to address this problem and provide guidan-

ce and solutions for managing the risks of exposure to toxic substances.”

Unintentional poisonings account for 50,000 deaths of children aged 0-14 years, according to estimates by the World Health Organization. “We urgently need to focus on the special vulnerability of children exposed to serious health threats from chemicals. The statistics are alarming. We must put children and their mothers at the centre of our efforts. We need develop ways of facilitating collaborative national and international research, and then we will be in a position to use our knowledge to reduce the terrible toll of childhood deaths,” said Professor Gyorgy Ungvary, Chief Medical Officer of State, Hungary.

There are tens of thousands of synthetic chemicals being produced commercially worldwide, yet there is a lack of adequate safety information about the great majority of these chemicals and their health and environmental effects. Putting basic information about chemical hazards into the hands of the public is one of the most powerful tools available for the protection of public health and the environment. Determining the roles and responsibilities of the chemical industry, as well as governments, in providing hazard information will be a key undertaking at this Fourth Session of the IFCS (Forum IV).

Forum IV will call for new efforts by industry and governments to generate and make available practical information on hazardous chemicals. Governments and stakeholders will be asked to prepare national assessments on children’s health and chemical safety as a basic information tool to identify priority concerns.

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Governments will also be asked to implement the Globally Harmonized System for the Classification and Labelling of Chemicals (GHS). The GHS, a global hazard communication system with standardized chemical labels and safety information, will enhance workers "right-to-know" about chemical hazards and how to better protect themselves. Labelling will also greatly reduce inadvertent exposures and poisonings of consumers.

Forum IV will also examine and call for action on the problems associated with acutely toxic pesticides; the widening gap in the ability of developing countries to keep pace with developed countries in implementing chemical safety policies and conventions; and capacity building for the sound management of chemicals.

The IFCS is a broad based alliance of all stakeholders concerned with the sound management of chemicals. It operates on the basis of full and open participation of all partners, offering representatives the opportunity to meet to build partnerships, provide advice and guidance, make recommendations and monitor progress.

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