

THE SPP MAKES YOU SICK HARMONIZATION OF ENVIRONMENTAL STANDARDS DIRECTLY IMPACTS CANADIANS' HEALTH

by Robert Chernomas

The current struggle for adequate funding for a not-for-profit health care system, crucial though it is, must be combined with the environmental movement's concerns for the quality of our air and water. This also needs to be connected to the food security movement's vision for the quality of our food, the labour movement's emphasis on the quality of our work, and the anti-poverty movement's analysis of income and wealth equity. If we broaden our understanding in this way, we will truly take the social determinants of health and disease into account, and come closer to effectively addressing the health concerns of Canadians.

Public health journals, environmental science publications, committees of the World Health Organization and the Environmental Defence Fund all express the view that cancer is primarily caused by human-made carcinogens as opposed to genetic or other "lifestyle" factors.

Heart disease and cancer, the first and second leading causes of death in late 20th century industrial capitalist societies, are linked to diets high in fat and low in fibre. These are foods that have been approved and promoted to suit corporate profitability, not the health of the citizens consuming them.

Cancer is also linked to chemicals in our air, water and food from industrial, agricultural, medical and cosmetic sources. The World Health Organization estimates that 20 per cent of cancers are genetic in origin and 80 per cent are environmentally based. This is good news, because it means that the vast majority of cancers are preventable through changes to the environment in which we live. Even the remaining



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20 per cent often need an environmental trigger.

TOXIC DUMPING

Each year, medium and large-sized Canadian companies are required to report emissions of carcinogens to the National Pollution Release Inventory. In 2001, Canadian industries reported the release of more than 18 million kilograms of known carcinogens into our air, soil and water. And this includes only the 266 substances included in the 2001 National Pollutant Release Inventory and takes into account only those businesses that used at least 10 tonnes of a listed substance in a given year.

When corporations dump carcinogens into our environment, it helps them cut costs by abandoning responsibility for the safe disposal of toxic chemicals or the use of more environmentally friendly materials. This might allow companies like Wal-Mart to slash prices to consumers, but at what cost to people's health and safety?

Rising incidences of cancer cannot be explained by our increased longevity.

From 1970 to 1998, the incidence of cancer in Canada increased by 35 per cent for men and 27 per cent for women.

NO CHOICE

It is not individual lifestyle choices that expose us to carcinogens at work, in the environment and at home. A recent study was led by researchers at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York, in collaboration with the Environmental Working Group and Commonweal. Nine volunteers, including PBS journalist Bill Moyers, were tested for the presence of chemicals, pollutants and pesticides in their blood and urine. None of the volunteers worked with chemicals on the job. Yet their bodies contained an average of 91 compounds, most of which did not exist 75 years ago. On average, each of the nine subjects carried 53 chemicals linked to cancer in humans or animals.

A 2006 Security and Prosperity Partnership report identified stricter pesticide residue limits in Canada as a "barrier to trade." As a result, Canada is raising pesticide limits on hundreds of fruits and vegetables.

The move is part of an effort to harmonize Canadian pesticide rules with those of the United States, which tend to allow higher residue levels in food. The SPP is not about raising food standards; it is about removing "trade irritants" and deregulating the food industries.

Cancer is not a lifestyle issue or a genetics issue so much as it is a political issue. And the same corporate sector that insists that Canadians accept their agenda for "prosperity" will strongly resist the changes to environmental and health regulations needed to wage a true war on cancer.

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