

Op-Ed: Flame Retardants Are the Asbestos of our Time

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At a hearing over whether Styrofoam packaging should be banned in Carmel, California, two young people presented letters from 34 restaurants opposing the law. The astute Mayor Sue McCloud looked them in the eye. "Do you work for the American Chemical Council?" she enquired. They blushed as they nodded yes. Upon examination, only three of the letters were signed by restaurant owners. Thirty-one were signed by busboys or waitresses.

This story of the tactics the chemical industry is using to sell unnecessary but profitable products is by no means an isolated incidence. A much more serious attack has been launched against California Assembly member Mark Leno's proposed bill AB706 which will stop the flow of dangerous fire-retardant chemicals into furniture and baby products in California homes. AB 706 would increase fire safety without using toxic chemicals.

Currently California is the only state in the U.S. with a flammability standard for furniture. The standard, requiring furniture foam to resist an open flame for 12 seconds, has not been proven effective because most furniture fires are caused by smoldering cigarettes not open flame sources. A smoldering cigarette standard for upholstery fabric exists in California, but is only voluntary. Foam treated with fire retardants will still burn once the fabric is burning.

AB706 mandates a smarter cigarette ignition resistance standard for fabric that addresses the vast majority of furniture fires by non-chemical means, such as using certain types of weave. Since fires begin in fabric, not foam, and most furniture fires are ignited by cigarettes, the new standard will address many times more fire deaths than the one it will replace.

A typical California compliant sofa contains pounds of unnecessary toxic chemicals without any proven impact on fire safety. Migrating from furniture into dust, these fire retardants accumulate in humans, especially in fat and breast milk. Many dozens of research papers, reviewed and approved by impartial scientists, show that fire retardant chemicals cause neurological and reproductive abnormalities, cancer, endocrine, and thyroid disease in animal tests. They can alter brain development, causing behavioral, learning and memory impairments throughout life. If these chemicals cause these severe adverse health problems in a variety of animal species, it is likely that they cause similar afflictions in humans. They could be implicated in growing rates of obesity, diabetes, hyperactivity, infertility, and autism.

Another major chemical problem is how to dispose of furniture containing these chemicals. If we put our couches in landfills, the chemicals can leach out and come back to us in our food or water. If we burn them, the fire retardants convert to even more toxic dioxins, which can remain in our bodies for decades and in the atmosphere forever.

Concerned about their potential loss of market, the chemical industry claims AB706 is "Putting Californians at Risk." Instead of paying for research into safer chemicals, the chemical industry pays for marketing campaigns featuring burning suburbs. Their "scientific" papers are not reviewed by impartial scientists and make exaggerated claims about fire hazards and the safety of chemicals that are known or likely to be toxic.

The industry advertises that the fire retardants in furniture foam have led to a 50% decrease in fire deaths in California. However, the good news they neglect to mention is that fires deaths are going down at a similar or greater rate in the other 49 states that don't have fire retardants in their furniture. In reality, the decrease in fire deaths is primarily due to a decrease in cigarette smoking.

According to the highly respected National Fire Protection Association, there is not conclusive data to show whether 28 years of putting toxic fire retardants into furniture and baby products in California has made any difference in fire safety. However, virtually all California babies are being born with dangerous fire retardants in their bodies. And they then get another dose from their mothers' breast milk, which contains higher levels than milk from women in other states.

The fire retardants in California furniture could well be the asbestos of our time. The danger signs are all there: persistence, bioaccumulation, and toxicity. Why throw the dice and expose ourselves and our children to serious health problems from these chemicals when there is no proven fire safety rationale for their use?

AB 706 currently needs more support in the California Senate and from Governor Schwarzenegger. The bill is an opportunity to reduce toxics in our bodies and our environment and to increase fire safety at the same time, regardless of how the chemical industry may try to spin the story. Tell your legislators and the governor that we do not need dangerous fire retardant chemicals in our homes or in our children's bodies. Tell them to support AB706.