

December 8, 2011

Dueling stories in USA Today — but only the science-based one is right

Environmental chemicals might or might not pose a significant risk to women's breast health, depending on which of two bizarrely conflicting *USA Today* articles you believe. Both articles assess the same Institute of Medicine (IOM) report on the causes of breast cancer, yet arrive at wildly different conclusions. The IOM is a group of independent experts who advise under the auspices of the National Academy of Sciences; this report was commissioned by the Susan G. Komen for the Cure breast cancer foundation.

One article asserts that the report demonstrates that certain lifestyle changes — such as quitting smoking, losing weight, and avoiding excessive use of hormone therapy and medical radiation exposure — are the **most important actions** that a woman can take to avoid breast cancer. Women should be much less concerned about the supposed risks of chemicals in cosmetics or plastics, or from hazardous cell phone radiation, as there is no evidence to support that these cause breast cancer. For instance, in the case of BPA, a chemical widely condemned by activist groups as a cancer-causing agent, the panel reports that there is insufficient data to support a link between breast cancer and the chemical (much to the chagrin of devoted anti-chemical advocacy groups).

As Dr. Eric Winer, a cancer specialist from the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston, puts it, when a woman develops breast cancer, "there's a tremendous desire to blame someone or something." But, he says, "There's a real danger in prematurely concluding that a substance is the culprit and then closing your eyes and not paying attention to what might be a much more concerning factor." ACSH's Dr. Josh Bloom wholeheartedly agrees. "With a few exceptions," he says, "no one really knows what causes cancer, including breast cancer. To target a supposed culprit based on feelings rather than evidence is counterproductive and a distraction from focusing on real health concerns."

The second *USA Today* article about the same report, however, demonstrates that it's possible for activists to interpret evidence in whichever way supports their own biases. Journalist Liz Szabo reinterprets the IOM report, getting "expert" opinions from the notoriously anti-chemical groups Silent Spring Institute and Breast Cancer Action, and concluding that environmental toxins are a **serious breast cancer concern** that require further research. Since scientists cannot definitively prove that environmental chemicals don't cause cancer (although such guarantees are never made in science), Szabo advises that this issue requires further study.

ACSH's Dr. Gilbert Ross, however, disagrees with Szabo's conclusions. "She doesn't seem to realize that cancer rates have been declining for almost every type of cancer, including breast cancer — even though we've been exposed to all of these supposedly harmful chemicals for decades," he says.

This information was found online at:

http://www.acsh.org/factsfears/newsID.3235/news_detail.asp