

Shaw's Eco-Logic

Keeping the voice of reason in the environmental debate, along with commentary on health care and the pop culture

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More junk science on fragrances

It used to be "publish or perish." But now, anything—and I mean anything—can be published in a so-called scientific journal.

Here's Exhibit A. *Fragranced consumer products: Chemicals emitted, ingredients unlisted*, touted by lead author Anne C. Steinemann on her faculty website at the University of Washington.

Basically, Steinemann's group looked at 25 common fragranced consumer products—laundry products, personal care products, cleaning supplies, and air fresheners—and found certain volatile organic compounds being emitted from many of them. It is important to understand that this—in and of itself—is absolutely meaningless.

Whatever harm that could conceivably come from these compounds could only be evaluated from EXPOSURE data, rather than content data. Consider, for example, that we are all exposed to gasoline, which is quite toxic (far more than any of the compounds listed in Steinemann's article) as well as combustible. So what? The plain empirical fact is that few if any people have ever died from "gasoline exposure."

And then there's the Article History. It was first received by the publisher (Elsevier) on 12 June 2009, and was then received in revised form on 3 August 2010. It was finally accepted on 17 August 2010.

Inasmuch as the lab work here was far from demanding, and no real conclusions were drawn, despite there being a "Conclusions" section in the article, the publishing delay bespeaks the poor quality of the original work.

It is quite likely that the authors were forced to include the following disclaimers, as a condition of publication:

In the abstract...

Because the analysis focused on compounds emitted and listed, rather than exposures and effects, it makes no claims regarding possible risks from product use.

And in the body of the article...

Finally, this study did not seek to assess, and makes no claims regarding, whether product usage would be associated with any risks.

You can bet, though, that the fear entrepreneurs will make all kinds of claims about risk, based on this pathetic piece of work.

You might ask why anyone would care about products that have been utilized with apparent safety for decades. Good question. Let's call it a perversion of the scientific method. The classic scientific method first requires an observation. Then, and only then, a hypothesis is suggested to explain this observation, and this hypothesis is tested by an experiment. If the hypothesis is verified by this experiment, it must be repeated by others, until its truth is accepted by the scientific community.

Back in the day, carcinogenic chemicals were determined to be such after people had observed an unusually high incidence of a particular cancer in the cohort of interest. Then, animal studies were done to verify the hypothesis.

Now, though, things have changed. Far too many "scientists," who are really little more than technicians, can achieve lifetime job security by picking some chemical—especially one that is in wide commercial use—and give

outrageous doses of it to a rodent. If an effect is observed, then "further study is warranted" and the chemical is put on the bad list. It matters not in the least that empirically, in actual human experience, there have been no observable ill effects.

Steinemann isn't even doing this. She is merely cataloging a list of chemicals. Shame on Elsevier for publishing this tripe, and shame on the granting agencies for supporting it.

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