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November 1, 2010

Fragranced Consumer Products—Do You Really Need To Worry?

By Michael D. Shaw

In keeping with the festivities of Halloween, the fear entrepreneurs are at it again. This time, they're trying to scare you about the volatile organic compounds (VOCs) emitted from many popular fragranced consumer products. However, there's far less to this than meets the eye.

After all, just about anything you can smell has an odor precisely because it is a VOC. And while a small number of people might experience irritation or even allergic reactions to some of these substances, simple avoidance or ventilation will take care of the problem in virtually all cases.



As the fear entrepreneurs have discovered, though, merely listing chemicals that are present—even in minute amounts—in popular consumer products can be enough to scare some folks, and will keep those donations rolling in. Sadly, the scare tactics and innuendos work, despite disclaimers in the very scientific literature they cite, regarding any health effects.

Which brings us to the strange case of Anne C. Steinemann, PhD, an environmental engineering professor at the University of Washington. Her latest work is a paper entitled "Fragranced consumer products: Chemicals emitted, ingredients unlisted." Steinemann has many publications to her credit within the field of environmental engineering, and has also taken a strong interest in the area of multiple chemical sensitivity.

Presumably, the chemical sensitivity issue led her to study fragranced products. Her latest effort, per the abstract, "[I]nvestigated volatile organic compounds (VOCs) emitted from 25 common fragranced consumer products—laundry products, personal care products, cleaning supplies, and air fresheners—using headspace analysis with gas chromatography/mass spectrometry (GC/MS)."

Notably, as indicated in the abstract and the body of the article "[T]his study did not seek to assess, and makes no claims regarding, whether product usage would be associated with any risks."

Please note that beyond satisfying mere curiosity, compiling a list of chemicals present in these consumer products is essentially a pointless endeavor, since any conclusions on health effects would only be possible with exposure data, not just content data. Moreover, Steinemann stipulates that the lack of public disclosure of these chemicals is in complete accordance with current regulations. She acknowledges that any hazardous substances would have to be disclosed.

It is customary for journal articles to include a "Conclusions" section, but Steinemann can only conclude that many VOCs contained in the products she examined are not listed on the label, because they don't have to be.

Not exactly earth-shattering, is it?

Besides, she already knew that, since she had covered this ground in an earlier paper entitled "Fragranced consumer products and undisclosed ingredients," published in the same journal, a little over two years ago. It was in this paper that she devoted an astonishing 1400-plus words to establish that the products tested were in compliance with all regulations. Thankfully, she was able to lose about 1000 words when this was rehashed in the current effort.

Not surprisingly, her conclusions in the earlier article are essentially the same as in the current effort.

Back in the day, the byword around college campuses was "Publish or perish," and the meaning was clear: If you didn't get enough articles published, you would not get tenure, and you would be out of a job. Now it seems that the meaning of this slogan has changed.

Given the less than stellar content of Steinemann's work, as discussed here, *Environmental Impact Assessment Review*, which published both articles, must apparently publish everything or perish. Given the amount of time it took from submission to acceptance, all was not well with her original manuscripts.

I contacted Eric Johnson, the journal's editor, and asked him some tough questions about the current article. Among other things, I wondered why such work would be published at all, inasmuch as the *EIA Review* aims to publish only pieces that are innovative, topical, and coherent. I also asked him if he were concerned that despite the disclaimers, the findings in this work will nevertheless be touted by all sorts of extremist groups.

He replied that the paper was reviewed by six or seven "reputable, qualified reviewers," who judged it to be consistent with the journal's aims. He also acknowledged that because the findings could be used irresponsibly, the paper was subjected to an intensive drawn-out review, adding that there were three or four drafts.

He did point out that several "prominent" reviewers urged immediate publication of the first draft. So much for peer review. At least the editorial board made Steinemann include the disclaimers.

Other than Steinemann, her colleagues, and the fear entrepreneurs, who benefits from such lax editorial standards? No one at all. Instead, the majority of us suffer the consequences.

As to the question posed in the title: No. You most definitely do not need to worry about fragranced consumer products. Worry instead about the destruction of science.