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Water Worries: Does an EPA Expert Need a Chemistry Lesson?

Trevor Butterworth, July 20, 2007

Or did US News and World Report screw up its facts?

US News and World Report (USNWR) [reports](#) on a new [study](#) by the Environmental Working Group (EWG), which warns about the quality of tap water in the District of Columbia. For residents inside the Beltway, this is not exactly news, given increasing [concern](#) over the past few years about high levels of lead in the local water supply. But to ramp up the anxiety, USNWR suggested that those who turned to bottled water as a safe alternative might be in for an equally unpleasant surprise, according to Ronnie Levin, "an EPA expert on water quality and a visiting scientist at Harvard University." As USNWR put it:

"Bottled water critics also point out that plastics can leach chemicals—including such tongue-twisters as phthalates, bisphenol A, and triclosan—that disrupt hormones and seem to cause problems such as infertility and cancer in lab animals. Levin is sufficiently concerned about the hazards of these chemicals that she tries to avoid liquids that have been stored in plastic bottles."

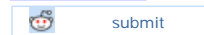
Did Levin really say or suggest this to USNWR? We ask, only because plastic water bottles do not, in fact, contain the kind of plasticizing agents that have been seized on by environmental groups as a threat to health. Almost all soft drink and water bottles are made out of *polyethylene terephthalate* (PET), which is a polyester that, unlike vinyl, doesn't require the use of *orthophthalates* for flexibility. PET has not been found to be toxic (it's biologically inert if ingested) and is not an endocrine disruptor.

Bisphenol-A is found in polycarbonate plastic, which is used in baby bottles and water cooler bottles. No regulatory agency anywhere in the world has found that leaching is a health risk, including the Food and Drug Administration which regulates food packaging as an indirect food additive.

Triclosan is an anti-bacterial agent most commonly in... soap. There is no conceivable reason why it would be used in a plastic water bottle – and enquiries to the plastics industry have not produced any evidence that it is. (In a separate matter, an experiment conducted in 2005 found that the chlorine in water interacted with triclosan at 40 degrees celsius to produce chloroform. The levels were 50 parts per billion, which is six times lower than the EPA's maximum safe dosage for chloroform in water. Even though there was no health risk, the way the study was promoted [generated](#) an international health scare.)

STATS asked Ronnie Levin whether she told US News that plastic water bottles contained phthalates, bisphenol A, and triclosan. "Nope," she emailed. "I just said that I try to avoid using plastic bottles."

It is possible that USNWR got confused by another recent EWG [report](#) on the quality of San Francisco Bay water, which cites the presence of phthalates, bisphenol A, and triclosan as a risk to health. (The EWG continues to misrepresent the scientific research on these chemicals, citing, for instance a study by Shanna Swan as proving a link between phthalates and reproductive abnormalities in boys, when the study says no such thing, and all the boys were normal.)

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