

INTRODUCTION

Hazardous substances are everywhere. In the early 1970s, DDT in mother's milk was found to exceed the legally allowed limit in commercial milk. Now PCB's are present in human fat and milk. Hazardous substances, by their very definition, pose acute and chronic health threats to humans, plants and animals. Examples such as these have drawn public attention to the problem of dealing with hazardous waste in a safe and effective manner.

It is essential that we employ better methods of disposal, and that we reduce our reliance upon hazardous substances. Concern over this burgeoning problem prompted participants in this year's seminar to investigate the issue of hazardous substances on a community-wide level.

Our research on the disposal of hazardous wastes by large industries disclosed some areas of concern. In particular, we question the policy of "self-monitoring" of pollutant discharge by industrial wastewater generators. We also found that even when the law has clearly ordered reforms in waste handling, compliance is often slow. It appears that our hazardous waste regulatory system is better at creating rules than it is at implementing and enforcing them.

Our surveys in the City of Berkeley show that most hazardous waste from small businesses is disposed of properly, and we conclude that the threat to the environment from improperly disposed waste is slight. Occupational exposure to hazardous substances is a far greater problem. Owners and workers alike are oblivious to the risks associated with many of the materials they use. As a result, these substances are handled and stored with a casual disregard for simple safety procedures.

At the mention of hazardous substances, people invariably think of industrial or agricultural chemicals, of unfamiliar compounds with unpronounceably long names or ominously short abbreviations. It is little known that many common household products are hazardous as well. Our survey of Berkeley's households showed that people are indeed unaware of the dangerous materials in their homes. Moreover, this lack of concern extends beyond workers and homeowners; students and technicians at the University of California are inadequately instructed in the safe use and disposal of laboratory chemicals.

Hazardous substances are now an integral part of our economy, but their pernicious effects on human health and on the vitality of the environment are becoming increasingly apparent. It behooves all of us to be more alert to the presence of hazardous substances around us; to reduce or eliminate our use of these substances whenever possible; and to provide for their safe handling and proper disposal when their use is unavoidable.