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The Right to Know Is for Everyone

The first issue of the revised *Environmental Health Perspectives* was published on Earth Day 1993. This April 2000 issue marks the seventh anniversary of the revised *EHP* and the first anniversary to fall in the new millennium. The overarching purpose of any journal should be to provide accurate and relevant information to its readership. This is especially important to environmental health, where the issues are often controversial and confusing, yet important to people's health, their environment, and their overall quality of life. We believe that the “right to know” obligates us to give to our readership, including scientists, industry, government, public advocacy groups, and the general public, the status of environmental health knowledge. This must be accomplished in an unbiased, objective, and timely manner to those who read *EHP*. The “right to know,” however, extends far beyond the scope of any journal. This issue is heating up, and there is often discordant debate on what kinds of information should be made available to the public, how the information should be presented, and the risks associated with public access to “worst case scenario” documents prepared for possible industrial accidents.

It is an unfortunate fact that sometimes it takes a disaster to change the way people think. For example, the London fog of 1952, which contained fine particulate matter from industrial smoke stacks, resulted in the deaths of over 4,000 people and was seminal in relating air pollution to human suffering. The devastating effects of synthetic chemicals such as herbicides and pesticides was an environmental disaster caught in time by the publication of Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* (1). The Bhopal disaster was of monumental proportions, resulting in the deaths of over 10,000 people. A leak of methyl isocyanate gas occurred in the early hours of 3 December 1984 at a pesticide factory that was owned by Union Carbide and located at the northern end of the city of Bhopal, India. According to the Bhopal People's Health and Documentation Clinic, 8,000 people were killed immediately after release of the gas and over 500,000 people were injured. It took the disaster of Bhopal for people to realize that the accidental release of toxic agents into the environment could result in massive human suffering anywhere, including the United States.

In response to the Bhopal disaster, the U.S. Congress enacted the Emergency Planning and Community Right-to-Know Act of 1986 (EPCRA) under Title III of the Superfund Amendments and Reauthorization Act. This legislation may yet prove to be one of the most important events in the history of environmental health because it instigated the idea that people had the right to know about hazardous agents being manufactured, used, or stored in or around their communities. In a free and open society, the concept of “right to know” seems fundamental. It makes very good sense that responsible people should have the right to know if there are threats to their safety. Perhaps one day, the “right to know” could become as basic to a democratic society as the right to free speech.

The “right to know” is predicated on the fact that the underlying commonality of most disasters is ignorance: ignorance of imminent

dangers present in the environment and ignorance of how to deal with an emergency. The London fog of 1952 and the Bhopal disaster could both have been avoided if either the potential victims or those responsible for the release of toxic agents had greater understanding of the dangers and how to deal with them. Of course, hindsight is always 20:20, and at the time, neither of these disasters could have been foreseen, but there was a lesson to be learned: environmental disasters might be avoided if people simply knew more about what was happening around them.

The concept of “right to know” is an extraordinary one and in its short life has already resulted in the reduction of both toxic chemical inventories and toxic waste inventories by chemical giants, such as Dow AgroSciences Ltd. and Monsanto, who have openly embraced the concept. The Chemical Manufacturer's Association, under their Community Awareness and Emergency Response (CAER) Code, promotes emergency response planning, calls for ongoing dialogue with local communities, and recognizes that the public right to know is an important part of corporate accountability. Risk Management Plans (RMPs) filed by chemical-using industries under the 1990 amendments to the Clean Air Act and the Worst Case Accident Scenarios mandated as part of RMPs are also open to public scrutiny. Citizens have the right to know about potential “fires, spills, and explosions involving hazardous chemicals where we work, live, and play” (2) and, just as importantly, the right to know whether or not those who use hazardous agents have the ability to deal with problems if an accident should occur or disaster strike.

The Department of Justice is now engaged in an effort to create a new class of data protections for Critical Infrastructure Information (CII) similar to Confidential Business Information (CBI). The concern is that industrial facilities, such as wastewater treatment plants, are vulnerable to cyberterrorism. Although legitimate CII data must be protected from terrorists, any legislation on this issue should not be used to retreat on the advances made in the public's “right to know.” Along a similar vein, some industries are pressuring the Environmental Protection Agency to relax requirements on proposals to develop confidential-labeling methods that make it more difficult for industries to withhold information from the public. The concern of industry is that implementation of such CBI rules would enhance vulnerability to terrorists, threaten some trade secrets, and dramatically increase their paperwork burden. These concerns should not be ignored, but the public's access to discharge emissions information cannot be eroded.

The April editorial is traditionally one in which the editors highlight some of the changes and achievements of the past year. The change of subject is not so marked when you consider that the “right to know” is in some ways akin to what we do at *EHP*. We believe that what we publish has a bearing on what happens in the environment and how people react to it. The program that the NIEHS supports, whereby any educational or research institution in any developing country in the world can have a free subscription

to *EHP*, is designed to help overcome difficulties in accessing environmental health information. We believe that our readers in developing countries also have a "right to know."

In this last year *EHP* has undergone some very important changes. The most important is that we have become an "e-journal." Not only do we publish the paper form of the journal but we also have an electronic form that resides on the Environmental Health Information Service Web site (3). Although the electronic journal has been available for some time, this last year has seen the conversion of almost all aspects of journal publishing to electronic processing. For example, we now prefer manuscripts to be submitted to *EHP* electronically. Instead of struggling through the old labor-intensive way of mailing multiple copies of the manuscript to *EHP*, now a single e-mail attachment will suffice. Instead of taking days and in many cases weeks to arrive, it now takes seconds. Unfortunately, not every file format submitted can be converted to a form that we can open and use, so we ask the reader to carefully consult the "Instructions to Authors" before submitting manuscripts. Submissions to the journal have doubled in this last year, with more than half of them now arriving electronically.

Manuscripts are also sent out for review electronically. This saves at least two weeks in the process, and our reviewers have embraced the method wholeheartedly. The rate-limiting step now lies with the reviewer, whereas in the old system the time taken in mailing and preparing the review packages was often as time consuming as the review itself. Reviews are now returned to the *EHP* office electronically, and our decisions to publish or not are made to authors via e-mail. This electronic processing has reduced the time from submission to decision to little more than six weeks on average. With the old system, the time taken for this part of the process was often as much as six months.

Accepted papers are first published on the Web (3) within about four months of acceptance. They will then appear in paper form generally about two to three months after this. The correct publication date is the publication date of the Web article. Each article is given an identifying Web label, which is a legitimate reference for that article. Our rapid turnaround has resulted in substantial increases in submissions to the journal, which, because of space limitations, has forced us to increase our rejection rate to over 70% and climbing; this higher rejection rate has improved the overall quality of the research papers published in *EHP*.

In the January issue of *EHP* we introduced two new formats in the Environews section to offer our reader more choices and broader coverage. "The Beat" provides brief snapshots of the very latest news in environmental health. "Science Selections" translates selected research from the current issue into language that is clear and understandable to a lay or nonspecialist reader.

We continue to reexamine *EHP* in light of our overarching goal to provide to the public and to the scientific government and industrial communities credible, objective and timely information on the critical environmental health issues of our day. Please let us know your ideas on how we can better meet this goal.

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Editors-in-Chief, *EHP*

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. Carson R. *Silent Spring*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1962.
2. RTK Net. Available: <http://www.rtknet.org> [RTK NET was started in 1989 in support of the Emergency Planning and Community Right to Know Act, which mandated public access to the Toxic Release Inventory. It is operated by two nonprofit organizations—OMB Watch and The Unison Institute].
3. Environmental Health Information Service. Available: <http://ehis.niehs.nih.gov>