

The Toxic Substances In Our Environment

Sharon Begley's Dec. 19 Science Journal could be interpreted as saying that exposures to small amounts of toxic substances in our food, water, air and from everyday products may actually be good for us and that perhaps we should relax environmental and occupational standards as a result. This view does not square with the tremendous complexity of the problem of toxic chemicals in our environment. It is difficult to see the relevance of controlled experiments that purport to show that low doses of some chemicals are beneficial, when in the real world there are vulnerable populations like young children and the chronically ill; exposures occur over very long periods of time, during different stages of life, and with very complex combinations of chemicals.

Even if "therapeutic" levels of a known toxin did exist, it would be poor public policy to assume that everyone's "good" dose was the same, ignoring the likelihood that some might be exceptionally sensitive to the harmful effects or the near impossibility of controlling exposures at those therapeutic levels. Fortunately, the article rightly notes the increasing evidence of unexpected very-low-dose harmful effects of an ever-expanding list of environmental toxins. Without this perspective, readers may have been misled about the controversial theory of hormesis. While we should be increasing our knowledge of how small doses of toxins can affect health, any attempt to introduce the theory of beneficial effects of low-dose exposures into regulatory policy would not only be scientifically irresponsible, it might be harmful to public health.

Joel Tickner, Sc.D.
David Kriebel, Sc.D.
Rafael Moure Eraso, Ph.D.
*Lowell Center
for Sustainable Production
University of Massachusetts, Lowell
Lowell, Mass.*

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