

OP-ED

Timing Is Everything — and The Time Is Now

— By *Eve Harris*

In Oakland recently, biologist Sandra Steingraber, PhD spoke passionately about environmental contaminants. She called for political action that would make dumping carcinogens into the environment as unthinkable in our society as slavery. Our children deserve “breast milk free of rocket fuel” along with clean air and water, she said.

In her talk, titled “The Timing Is the Poison,” Steingraber emphasized that biological vulnerability to carcinogens changes throughout our lifespan. Her talk was part of a recent town hall meeting, “Communities Coming Together to Explore Environmental Links to Breast Cancer.”

Although “the dose is the poison” is a long-held tenet of toxicology, timing is equally important in causing cancerous breast cell mutations, she said. She explained breast development in detail, with an emphasis on the unique periods in the lives of girls and young women when their tissue is most vulnerable to environmental influence.

Steingraber’s bad news for us appears to be that, despite

observational data linking excess alcohol, high body-mass index, and other controllable lifestyle factors to breast cancer, it is probably too late for most adults to alter the course of their breast cells.

There is hope, however, for the future generations who will benefit from political and research initiatives that are growing particularly robust in the Bay Area.

An epidemiologic study currently enrolling seven-year-old Bay Area girls measures physiological changes during their sexual maturation as well as environmental exposures that might affect their future risk of breast cancer. The epidemiologic study is “exactly what we need to do!” Steingraber said.

Californians now enjoy the protection of the nation’s first Safe Cosmetics Act, which requires companies to notify the state when using chemicals linked to cancer and birth defects. A pilot project being developed by Marin Breast Cancer Watch (MBCW) will inform and motivate Marin County girls to reduce their future risk of breast cancer by

minimizing their exposures to carcinogens and by adopting healthy behaviors.

Steingraber encouraged town hall attendees to become familiar with “2006 State of the Evidence: What Is the Connection between the Environment and Breast Cancer?” The report, published by the San Francisco-based groups Breast Cancer Fund and Breast Cancer Action, summarizes the findings of 350 studies on environmental links to breast cancer and includes policy and research recommendations.

Steingraber steadfastly urged political activism to prevent human exposure to environmental carcinogens, an issue she called “the human rights issue of our times.” Although our community is beset with unusually high breast cancer rates, it is also fortunate to have highly active advocates for human rights, and that constitutes a potent formula for change. ❀

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