

State panel to vote on biomonitor legislation

Program would measure toxins stored in body

By Richard Halstead
IJ reporter

A bill establishing a program for measuring the levels of industrial chemicals in the bodies of volunteer subjects is up for a vote today in the state Assembly's Health Committee.

The vote follows an announcement from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that it will provide a minimum of \$1.7 million to pay for the biomonitoring program. Biomonitoring, short for biological monitoring, is the process by which chemicals in a person's body are measured using samples of breast milk, blood, urine, or fatty tissue.

A nonprofit health and environmental research institute based in Bolinas, Commonweal, co-sponsored the legislation together with the Breast Cancer Fund, based in San Francisco.

"We all have our fingers crossed," said Sharyle Patton, director of Commonweal's Biomonitoring Center.

The bill, SB600, has passed the state Senate. If the legislation is approved by the Assembly and signed by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, testing could begin next year with the federal money. The funding commitment came in response to a request from U.S. Rep. Nancy Pelosi, D-San Fran-

cisco.

"We are experiencing a dramatic increase in chronic diseases and illnesses, and mounting evidence links the incidence and severity of some illnesses and diseases to environmental contaminants," said state Sen. Deborah Ortiz, D-Sacramento, one of the bill's co-authors.

These chronic diseases include cancer, asthma, birth defects, developmental disabilities, endometriosis and infertility, biomonitoring proponents say.

"This bill will enable us to know just which toxic pollutants are in our bodies and move accordingly to improve everyone's health and safety," said Ortiz, head of the Senate Health Committee.

The bill is opposed by several industry groups. The California Chamber of Commerce is concerned that the legislation might lead to the elimination or reduction of chemicals that have not been proven harmful.

"The approach suggested in SB600 that relies on biomonitoring data as the sole indicator for public health intervention is scientifically flawed and would lead to an unwise use of limited resources," the chamber said.

The CDC reported in January 2003 that it found 116 environmental chemicals in the 8,000 people it tested across the United States in two years. The chemicals included: lead, mercury, cadmium and other metals; dioxins, polychlorinated biphenyls

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(PCBs), herbicides, various types of pesticides, and phthalates, an industrial chemical found in perfume and hair spray.

The CDC studies found that Mexican American children had three times the levels of the toxic insecticide DDT as compared to other participants. DDT has been banned in the United States for over 30 years.

Earlier this year, the Oakland Tribune released the results of biological testing done on a Berkeley family of four picked at random. In addition to PCBs, plasticizers, mercury, lead and cadmium, the tests revealed extremely high levels of a flame retardant — polybrominated diphenyl ether.

There are an estimated 85,000 chemicals registered for use by

the Environmental Protection Agency, and 2,000 new chemicals are added every year, Patton said. But there are methods for detecting only 430 of them.

"No one knows what level is safe," Patton said. "We get a number from the CDC to indicate what load the average American carries, but that may not be a reference for safety."

SB600 would create a 16-member advisory panel to oversee the biomonitoring program, which would be executed by the State Department of Health Services and the California Environmental Protection Agency. The Senate Appropriations Committee estimates the program would cost \$4 million a year.

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