

# CRAAB!'s Advocacy Focuses on Environmental Links to Cancer

by Margaret Roberts

On March 24, NYSBCN held its 11<sup>th</sup> Annual NYS Breast Cancer Advocacy Day at the State Capitol, where Jane Houlihan, of the Environmental Working Group (EWG), stunned participants with her presentation entitled, "It's In Us: Chemicals and Our Bodies," which drove home the message that we are all living with high levels of pollution and carcinogens not just around us but inside our bodies, and that many of these contaminants, which are not thoroughly tested or regulated, are known to be harmful to our health.

EWG tested one sample of blood from 10 Americans on one day and discovered a total of 287 industrial chemicals, including numerous pesticides, consumer products ingredients, dozens of flame retardants, PFOA's, and waste chemicals from the burning of coal, gasoline and garbage, among other toxins known to cause cancer and disrupt hormone function. The shocking point is — these tests were done on the umbilical cord blood of newborns. These infants had been exposed to these chemicals before they were born and before their blood-brain barriers — the body's defense that keeps contaminants from reaching the central nervous system — were formed.

Ms. Houlihan explained that of the 287 chemicals detected in umbilical cord blood:

- 180 cause cancer in humans or animals,
- 217 are toxic to the brain or nervous system,
- 208 cause birth defects or abnormal development in animal tests.

And the dangers of pre- or post-natal exposure to this complex mixture of carcinogens, developmental toxins and neurotoxins *have never been studied*. Many of these chemicals are endocrine disruptors and neurotoxins that can affect, even at low doses, our hormone, reproductive, neurological and immune systems, brain function, memory and behavior. There are new studies that link some endocrine disruptors, such as bisphenol A, to diabetes and cardiovascular diseases.

Scientists and pediatricians are seeing many changes in children's health that genetics can't explain. Girls are



Laura Weinberg, Karen Miller, speaker, Jane Houlihan and Margaret Roberts on Advocacy Day. Karen, Laura and Margaret make up the environmental committee for NYSBCN that worked to bring Jane to NY to be the keynote speaker for Advocacy Day.

showing earlier breast development; the average age is now 10 years old — 4<sup>th</sup> graders. Girls are reaching puberty at much younger ages, and early puberty is linked to a broad array of health problems, including breast cancer. Other health disorders are on the rise: Autism now affects 1 child in 150; Asthma affects 1 child in 10. There has been a 28% rise in childhood cancers in the past 60 years; 1% decrease per year in sperm counts among men in industrialized countries; increase in disorders of the male reproductive systems.

What can be done to reduce our exposure and that of our children?

Ms. Houlihan suggested that in our personal lives we can buy organic foods, filter our tap water, eat low mercury fish, use cast iron instead of non-stick cookware, and avoid harmful household products and cosmetic ingredients. For more information about these strategies you can contact [www.ewg.org](http://www.ewg.org) or [www.safecosmetics.org](http://www.safecosmetics.org) or [www.cosmeticdatabase.com](http://www.cosmeticdatabase.com).

However, she and many other health and environmental advocates stress that what is really needed are broad changes in public health policies that protect us from harm by removing toxic substances from our personal care products, homes, neighborhoods, work places, play grounds, as well as from our food and the air we breathe. There are over 15,000 chemicals used in high amounts in the US, and about 70,000 more used routinely in various capacities, most of which have never been thoroughly tested, and virtually none tested together for the effects of accumulated or mixed exposure toxicity. As explained on EWG's website:

"The nation's toxic chemical regulatory law, the Toxic Substances Control Act, is in drastic need of reform. Passed in 1976 and never amended since, TSCA is widely regarded as the weakest of all major environmental laws on the books today. When passed, the Act declared safe some 62,000 chemicals already on the market, even though there were little or no data to support this policy. Since that time another 20,000 chemicals have been put into commerce in the United States, also with little or no

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data to support their safety...Yet even as our knowledge about the link between chemical exposure and human disease grows, the government has almost no authority to protect people from even the most hazardous chemicals on the market."

To strengthen toxic chemical oversight, two new bills have been introduced on the national level: **the Kid-Safe Chemicals Act** that will reform weak chemical regulatory law to finally require review and testing of chemicals, biomonitoring, promotion of safer alternatives and providing public information updates; and **the Ban Poisonous Additives Act of 2009**, which The Breast Cancer Fund in San Francisco helped develop, that would ban bisphenol A (BPA) from food and beverage containers, including cans and plastic containers.

On the state level, **the new Pollution Prevention Institute (NYSP2I)**, a collaboration between Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT), Clarkson University, RPI, University at Buffalo and 10 Regional NYS Technology Development Centers, is underway at RIT, to make NYS more sustainable for workers, the public, the environment, and the economy through: reductions in toxic chemical use; the efficient use of raw materials, energy and water; and reductions in emissions to the environment and waste generation. During the past year, Margaret Roberts, CRAAB! Program Coordinator, together with fellow NYSBCN Environmental Committee

members, Karen Miller and Laura Weinberg, have attended conferences and meetings on the organizational structure and mission of NYSP2I, offering the perspective from the breast cancer community on ways to eliminate carcinogens from our environment.

This past year, Roberts and NYSBCN Environmental Committee members also worked on the state bill, **the Bisphenol A-free Children and Babies Act**, sponsored by Assemblyman Steve Englebright and Senator Antoine Thompson, that is currently making it's way through legislative committees, hopefully without too many changes that would weaken its effectiveness. NYSBCN also advocated for the state to create an **Environmental Health Tracking System and biomonitoring program** that would gather human health data and environmental data to compare them on a geographical basis to track cases of cancer and other diseases.

There is much work to be done, and greater public awareness is a key element in reducing the toxic pollution in and around us. If you would like more information about what you could do to help promote changes in national and state public health policies, or what you can do in your daily lives to minimize exposure to carcinogenic substances, please contact CRAAB!