

President Soft-pedals on Mercury Reform

By Kathleen Schuler

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We have a big problem—widespread mercury pollution is contaminating our waters and our fish as well as poisoning our children. The environmental and health damages caused by mercury have been fairly well documented. Now, for the first time, we are learning more about the financial costs of mercury exposure too.

Mercury is present at some level in all lakes, rivers and streams. Forty-eight states have issued fish consumption advisories due to mercury contamination. Mercury is a potent brain toxin that can cause reduction in IQ, as well as learning and developmental problems in children exposed to even low levels of methylmercury, the kind found in fish.

A new study by researchers at Mt. Sinai Medical School has quantified the economic impacts of mercury exposure, specifically on lost productivity due to reductions in IQ. That cost is estimated to be \$8.7 billion annually. The researchers further estimated that \$1.3 billion of this is attributable to U.S. power plants, the largest source of U.S. mercury emissions.

The authors acknowledge that their analysis includes only the costs from reduced productivity in adulthood due to reduction in IQ. There are additional costs to society and to individuals from these exposures, which are much more difficult to quantify. Adverse social outcomes associated with IQ reductions include: poverty, out-of-wedlock birth, low-weight births, welfare reciprocity and dropping out of high school. Because mercury causes learning and developmental problems in children, there are additional costs to the education system. On average it costs twice as much to educate a child with special education needs as it does a student not in special education.

Preventing learning and developmental disabilities would also save significant public resources devoted to social service and criminal justice programs aimed at adults. Almost 40% of adults with learning disabilities have difficulties with employment or social adjustment. Likewise, an estimated 42% of adults in correctional institutions were eligible for special education programs. Other costs include lost wages and productivity for parents who miss work to deal with their children's problems and health care dollars devoted to diagnostic testing and mental health services. There are also unquantifiable personal impacts as children, families and affected adults struggle with these problems on a day-to-day basis.

We must stop this cost-shifting to the public and require coal plants to install the mercury-control equipment that can take care of this problem over the next few years. Cost-effective technologies now exist to reduce mercury emissions by 90% by the end of the decade.

The bad news is that the U.S. Environmental Agency's (EPA's) new rules to finally regulate mercury emissions from coal-burning power plants don't go far enough, fast enough. They call for 20% reduction by 2010 and a 70% reduction by 2018. Contrast this with the current requirements of the Clean Air Act which classifies mercury as a "hazardous air pollutant" and requires a 90% reduction by 2008.

The good news is---mercury pollution is something we can fix. The EPA can act now to require swifter reductions in mercury emissions from coal plants, which will ultimately contribute to making our waters, our fish and our children safe from mercury pollution.

All children have the right to grow up in a clean environment that is free of toxic pollutants, to safely eat fish and to realize their full intellectual and social potential. Mercury pollution is compromising these rights. And it's costing all of us.

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