Contaminated Without Consent

By A Correspondent

Breast cancer cases have hit a new record and the increase shows no sign of slowing down. The latest UK government statistics (September 2006), confirm that incidence has risen 80% in three decades and continues on an upward trend. Breast cancer is now the commonest form of cancer in the UK, and by far the most common cancer in women: around 42,000 women are diagnosed each year. The hidden trauma of breast cancer, both for survivors and victims, causes immense private suffering.

An increasing body of scientific evidence indicates that a multitude of synthetic (human-made) chemicals which mimic female sex hormones are present in our environment. Since both onset and progression of breast cancer is known to be influenced by hormones, the overloading of a woman's hormonal system as a result of her life-long exposure to low levels of these chemicals may increase her risk of breast cancer. Susceptibility to such risk-laden exposures is particularly heightened during vulnerable life-stages such as foetal development, puberty, menopause and older age.

Despite this common knowledge, the issue of the toxicity of synthetic chemicals and their link to cancer has, until now, been steadily refuted by government, industry and mainstream cancer organisations. Strategic expert advice to government is that breast cancer is exclusively a disease of ageing and 'lifestyle' factors, and that provision should be made for a greatly increased disease burden in future decades. As a result, breast cancer is envisaged to become an almost ubiquitous, fatal disease, to be controlled by pharmaceutical drugs.

The increase in breast cancer incidence, however, can only be partially explained by life choices and changes in lifestyle. In fact, research has shown that less than 50% of breast cancer cases can be attributed to acknowledged risk factors (such as having a first baby late in life, not having children, poor diet, obesity and alcohol). Around one in twenty breast cancer cases is believed to be inherited, but for the overwhelming majority of women the disease is not passed on through genes, but acquired during their lifetime.

Unpublished government data indicates that mastectomy rates have jumped 44% in fifteen years, across all age groups. Most disturbingly, the upward trend is just as drastic (41%) in women aged 15-44 years old - evidence that breast cancer incidence is rising in all age groups, and is not just a disease of ageing.

There are about 100,000 synthetic chemicals on sale in Europe. Their residues have now spread widely into air, soil, water, sediments, wildlife and its habitats, and human tissues. We are exposed everyday to pesticide residues in food and to synthetic chemicals in consumer products. For the vast majority of these substances, no adequate toxicity data has been collected. Of the 45,000 toxic chemicals listed by the US National Institute of Safety and Health in 1980, 2,500 were identified as carcinogens, 2,700 as mutagens (causing genetic change) and 300 as teratogens (causing malformation of an embryo). Less than 7,000 had been adequately tested.

Over 400 chemicals are currently thought by European regulatory authorities to disrupt the hormone system and are suspected to be linked to hormonally dependent cancers. Hundreds of independent scientists have signed the Prague Declaration expressing concern about endocrine-disrupting chemicals. However, regulatory science lags behind and precautionary action is not yet being taken.

The No More Breast Cancer Campaign is urging the government to acknowledge that lifestyle factors alone cannot fully account for the inexorable rise in breast cancer and to introduce a strategic and integrated cross-government plan to reduce people's exposure to potentially harmful substances in the environment as a precautionary measure.

In practice this would mean, for example, new limits to exposure in food to pesticide residues, which currently contaminate over a third of the fresh produce we buy. The use of harmful industrial chemicals - for example, bisphenol-A in tin-can linings - would be curbed. Air pollutants would also be included, and efforts to reduce harmful emissions integrated across governments. An effective monitoring system, involving tests for chemicals in volunteers' blood and body fat, would, for the first time, provide a clear picture of the extent of our own pollution.

All these strategic measures are beyond the control of individual women and can only be taken by government. However, there are certain precautions one can have the power to take now: for example, choosing to buy organically produced food. This is beneficial because it both helps to minimise routine chemical exposure and reduces the toxic load on the environment. As consumers one can also seek out eco-friendly cosmetics, and household cleaning products that do not contain harmful chemicals.

The rising incidence in breast cancer is often obscured by government and mainstream cancer charities behind messages about funding, treatment and reductions in actual death rates. Currently there is simply no proper redress for women whose breast cancer may have been caused by environmental pollutants. ‘The No More Breast Cancer’ campaign is providing a new focus for action and debate. □□□ *—TWNF*