

## Moving Up the Hierarchy of Controls

Proposing a new chemicals policy.

**? On the days when the floors are stripped and waxed in our hospital, some of us get headaches and experience wheezing. Could it be the chemical used for stripping the floors? How can I get more information about this potential hazard?**

Floor strippers are among those cleaning chemicals associated with asthma, headaches, and other health effects. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) Hazard Communication Standard ([www.osha.gov/SLTC/hazardcommunications/index.html](http://www.osha.gov/SLTC/hazardcommunications/index.html)), also known as the Worker Right to Know Law, requires that employers provide access to material safety data sheets for chemicals in the workplace and label containers of hazardous chemicals. But these sheets are not always comprehensive, may minimize the hazards, and do not identify substitutes for the chemical.

Getting all the information and finding safer alternatives is a challenge. Unlike pharmaceuticals, for which safety and health testing is required by the Food and Drug Administration prior to approval to market the drugs, there are no laws requiring that chemicals be tested before being sold. The lack of a legal requirement results in limited data on how chemicals affect human health.

A new effort is under way in the United States to reform the chemical policy to provide more information about chemical haz-

ards. Discussions have been informed by the recent proposal for safer chemicals policy in the European Union, called REACH (Registration, Evaluation and Authorization of Chemicals), which requires companies that manufacture or import more than one ton of a chemical substance to register it in a central database. This policy not only would ensure that basic information on all chemicals is available to the public, it would encourage the substitution of less dangerous substances for dangerous chemicals.

In the United States, chemical policy reform is defined in a platform called the Louisville Charter for Safer Chemicals, which incorporates the existing right-to-know laws and borrows from REACH.

The platform calls for a comprehensive policy to

- **require safer substitutes and solutions**—seek to eliminate hazardous chemical use and emissions by altering production processes, substituting safer chemicals, redesigning products and systems, and rewarding innovation. This includes an obligation on the part of the public and private sectors to develop sustainable chemicals, products, materials, and processes.
- **phase-out persistent, bioaccumulative, or highly toxic chemicals**—make a priority the elimination of chemicals that are slow to degrade, accumulate in fatty tissues, or are highly hazardous to humans or the environment.
- **give the public and workers the full right to know**—label products that contain hazardous chemicals, list quanti-

ties of hazardous chemicals used in agriculture and in manufacturing facilities, and provide public access to safety data on chemicals.

- **act on early warnings**—act to prevent harm when credible evidence exists that harm is occurring or is likely to occur.
- **require comprehensive safety data on all chemicals**—assume that a chemical is highly hazardous unless comprehensive safety data are available on the chemical and require manufacturers to provide these data for a chemical to remain on the market—this is the principle of “No Data, No Market.”
- **take immediate action to protect communities and workers**—when communities and workers are exposed to levels of chemicals that pose an immediate health hazard, immediate action is necessary to eliminate these exposures.

If the chemical components are hazardous or no data are available, safe alternatives should be sought prior to use. If a health hazard emerges after a product is marketed, action should be taken.

Nurses can support legislative proposals at the state, local, national, and international levels and negotiate with their hospitals or institutions to incorporate the Louisville Charter.

For more information on the relationship between chemicals and health, visit [www.protectingourhealth.org](http://www.protectingourhealth.org). For information about the Louisville Charter, visit [www.cectoxic.org](http://www.cectoxic.org). ▼

*Susan Wilburn is a senior specialist with the Center for Occupational and Environmental Health at the ANA.*