

for 10 to 15 minutes, or as long as they want, get the distillation, ask the questions that they want and have someone be able to provide them with answers to the clinical problems that they're running across in their practice, in a relatively short amount of time, from someone whose job isn't to sell them a product."

Along with the BC Community Drug Utilization Program, the 4 aforementioned programs have also attempted to jointly produce reviews under the rubric of an informal umbrella called the Canadian Academic Detailing Collaboration. They cooperated on a review of statins for cardiovascular disease, and ultimately hope COMPUS will aid their cause by producing reviews they can disseminate within their respective provincial borders.

In turn, Vice President Barb Shea says embryonic COMPUS itself hopes to eventually build a publicly accessible electronic database collating all evidence-based reviews, including those undertaken by academic detailers; as well as undertake research and then create a pair of databases about the relative merits of evidence-based interventions like academic detailing, therapeutics letters and e-detailing. "One [database] would be about what works with health professionals. And the second is what works with consumers and patients."

Therapeutics Initiative Program Coordinator Ciprian Jauca says therapeutic newsletters have already proven their effectiveness. Under UBC's program, established in 1994, findings are essentially disseminated as a randomized control trial, with the letters being mailed out to doctors.

Prescribing profiles are subsequently examined. "Thus far, we've found that you can't see an impact of any one letter by itself. There were trends but none of it was statistically significant," Jauca says. "But when you combined the effects of the letters over time, there are highly statistically significant effects in terms of actually prescribing changing in the expected direction."

Allen says Nova Scotia recently surveyed its doctors to ascertain the effectiveness of academic detailing as a continuing medical education (CME) tool. While some physicians found office visits inconvenient and weren't thrilled by having CME provided by non-physicians (Nova

Scotia uses 2 pharmacists and a nurse as detailers), others found it "invaluable."

The primary knock has been cost, Allen says. "But if you think education is expensive, try ignorance. You don't have to save many prescriptions to cover the costs of academic detailing." — Wayne Kondro, *CMAJ*

DOI:10.1503/cmaj.070072

Canada's new toxic hit list called "inadequate"

Is it a toxic hit list or toxic miss list? That's the question many in the medical and scientific community are asking about the federal government's new Chemicals Management Plan — a multi-million dollar program that imposes strict new regulations on about 4000 "legacy chemicals" used in industrial and consumer products.

The so-called "toxic hit list," unveiled by Prime Minister Stephen Harper on Dec. 7, targets substances such as benzene, sulfuric acid and Bisphenol A that were grandfathered onto the market in 1994 when tougher new environmental rules took effect. Phase 1 of the 4-year \$300-million plan will begin in February when Environment Canada launches a review of 200 chemicals, which it categorizes as "high-priority" and a potential risk to human health. Once every 3 months the department will release the names of chemicals in small groups, after which industry will have to provide information that proves the substances



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Critics say the government ought to adopt the precautionary principle when dealing with toxic substances.

are safe. If they fail, the chemicals will face stringent controls or be banned.

While the plan has been endorsed by several high profile environmental groups including Pollution Probe and Environmental Defence, it has been met with skepticism by some scientists and medical doctors.

Scientists for a Healthy Environment has garnered nearly 800 signatures from scientists in a letter that criticizes the Tory's new strategy

"I suspect it's an inadequate plan," says Dr. David Schindler the Killam Memorial professor of ecology at the University of Alberta and the driving force behind Scientists for a Healthy Environment. "I think the expense of doing a thorough review and evaluation of these things is beyond the budgets that we see in these departments these days, and I think the onus if not for doing them, then funding them, should be thrust back on industry."

The group's letter criticizes the government for not moving fast enough and for not using the "precautionary principle" when dealing with the chemical industry. Also called "reverse onus," the principle would shift the responsibility to industry to prove its products are safe. Under the current system, it's up to the government to prove that substances are dangerous. Schindler says he believes such a legislative shift is crucial, especially when you consider the severe budget cuts the department has faced over the past 30 years.

"I just don't think those departments have the capacity anymore," he says. "Of these thousands of chemicals there might be 4 or 5 people in Environment Canada who are knowledgeable enough to wade through them."

George Enei, Environment Canada's point man on legacy chemicals, says that there is currently no plan to adopt reverse onus. Rather, his department has moved towards a "shared" responsibility between government and industry.

"Historically, when you take a look at the legacy substances it's always been on the shoulders of the government to collect the data, analyze the data and make a decision. Now what we're saying is 'no, we're not going to take that full responsibility. We want others to do some of that work for us,'"

says Enei, Environment Canada's director of existing substances. Besides, he adds, "Industry knows where the bar is. They know that they shouldn't be bringing forth a substance that is toxic"

That's not enough for Dr. Warren Bell, a family physician in Salmon Arm, BC and a founding member of the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment.

"It remains to be seen if this government has the will to implement a truly robust program that puts industry on notice that its products have to be demonstrated to be safe," he says. "The initiative to document and evaluate all the chemicals in production or sale in Canada [in the first place] was begun before the Conservatives came into power," he adds.

Meanwhile the industry, which faces potential bans on chemicals used in everything from cans to carpeting, supports the plan.

"Listen, sometimes a ban is appro-

priate, and if it is — then so be it," says Gordon Lloyd vice president of technical affairs for the Canadian Chemical Producers' Association, which represents some 70 manufacturers. "Companies are in this for the long term and they want to make sure they're managing these things responsibly and safely."

As for the prospect of reverse onus, which has been recently adopted by the European Union as part of their strategy on legacy chemicals, Lloyd is skeptical.

"I guess it's a question of whether the public will have more confidence in a system where the government does the assessment or the industry. I guess time will tell, but I think the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval from government will do more to improve public confidence."

It's that attitude that Dr. John Smol thinks is part of a larger problem with the way the federal government has tra-

ditionally handled environmental issues, from acid rain to climate change.

"It's almost like you have to prove a problem before you get any action," says Smol, the Canada Research Chair in Environmental Change at Queen's University and one of the signatories on Schindler's letter. "It should be a precautionary approach, which is rarely done in environmental issues, sadly."

"A lot of these problems have long term perspectives and governments think in four year cycles, at best, while industry thinks even shorter — often in [financial] quarters or 90-day cycles. But most environmental problems have much longer legacies."

The United States has to assess about 100 000 legacy chemicals. Rather than evaluating the toxicity of each one, its concentrating on those that appear in the largest volume in the environment. — Brad Mackay, Ottawa

DOI:10.1503/cmaj.070070