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Pesticides, policies and parents

It is late June as we prepare this issue, a time of year when we leave the office to attend school plays. This year the daughter of a staff member has a nonspeaking but indispensable role as a magic apple tree, and we are anxious to see how it goes. We join a group of parents repairing wands (and replacing leaves), and the conversation turns to pesticides, for June is also a time for gardening. The word on our minds, if not so readily on our lips, is chlorpyrifos, an insecticide much in the news lately as a result of a revised risk assessment issued by the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).¹

Chlorpyrifos, an organophosphate, is related to the nerve gases used during World War II. Found in many home, garden and agricultural pesticides (over 200 products containing chlorpyrifos are available in Canada) the organophosphates share a common neurotoxicity: they are cholinesterase inhibitors. Concern about the risks to children of these and other pesticides arises for 2 reasons. First, children are drawn to lawns and apple trees less by their flawless perfection than by how good it feels to roll on them or swing from their branches and are thus exposed to higher concentrations of chemicals. Secondly, their developing nervous systems are particularly susceptible to neurotoxic effects, with the worrying potential outcome of neurologic damage and developmental impairment.

The US EPA increased the safety threshold for chlorpyrifos 10-fold when new studies showed that the fetuses of rats given the chemical were brain damaged. US manufacturers have agreed to a voluntary phase-out of chlorpyrifos in consumer products and will evaluate the feasibility of reducing the concentration of the chemical in agricultural products.

As of June 12, Canadian manufacturers had not yet agreed to a parallel move. Health Canada, through its Pest Man-

agement Regulatory Agency (PMRA), stated that chlorpyrifos is "one of the organophosphate pesticides under re-evaluation."² We are in a familiar position, lagging behind consumer protection measures implemented in the US. Abundant and detailed information on chlorpyrifos and other pesticides is available on the EPA Web site (www.epa.gov). The lack of a comparable Canadian source has led the House of Commons environment committee to make strong recommendations for public access to PMRA files relating to pesticides, including manufacturers' data, statistics on sales and use, reports of poisonings and adverse effects, and PMRA decisions on pesticide use or sale.^{3,4}

But any decision made by Health Canada will soon be irrelevant. Although Canadian farmers can obtain and use chlorpyrifos, treated crops will no longer be acceptable in the US market, and so farmers will discontinue its use. Nor will parents stand about waiting for official decisions, governmental or otherwise. The school that our apple tree attends has no pesticide on its lawn, not as a result of school board policy (there is none) but because of pressure from parents. Given a choice between a dandelion lawn and the risks of pesticide exposure, parents know what they'd rather have their children live with. — *CMAJ*

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