

INSIDERS: MDs should take lead in pesticide ban

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The time is now to advocate for health-protective legislation

With spring upon us, it's time to think about our lawns—or rather a campaign by some physicians to prohibit lawn and garden pesticides. A number of recent events suggest this may be an auspicious moment to phase out these domestic poisons right across the country.

On Nov. 17, 2005, the Supreme Court of Canada declined to hear an appeal from an industry lobby that had challenged the City of Toronto over a pesticide bylaw enacted in 2003. The Court's decision means Toronto's pesticide restrictions will now remain in place for good. The ruling is the latest in a long series of judicial blows to the industry, beginning with a 2001 decision in which the Supreme Court upheld a pesticide bylaw in the town of Hudson, Que. Taken together, these rulings have established that municipalities throughout the country have the authority to regulate toxic lawn products—even on private property—to protect citizens' well-being.

Earlier this year and late last year, the research firm Oracle Poll spoke to residents about this issue in several Canadian cities. Oracle found that everywhere it went, large majorities support pesticide restrictions. In Ottawa, Oracle found a pesticide phase-out on private property is supported by 76% of respondents, while 82% support a phase-out in public parks. As well, 77% of Ottawans said they believe lawn pesticides "pose a threat to the environment," while 74% believe these chemicals "pose a health threat to children." In Peterborough, Ont., Oracle found a pesticide phase-out on private property is supported by 84% of residents, while 77% believe these chemicals threaten the environment, including ground water. And a poll conducted by another research firm, Strategic Communications Inc., found a pesticide phase-out bylaw is supported by 71% of Toronto residents.

Moving to Western Canada, Oracle found a pesticide phase-out on private property is supported by 75% of Edmonton residents, while 79% support a phase-out in public parks. Seventy-one per cent feel lawn pesticides threaten the environment. In other words, poll after poll shows Canadians see lawn pesticides as a threat to their children and the natural world—and want the chemicals phased out.

In April of last year, the Ontario College of Family Physicians released its systematic Pesticide Literature Review, the most comprehensive examination in Canada of pesticides' effects on human health. The college found consistent links between pesticide exposure and serious illnesses including brain cancer, prostate cancer, kidney cancer and pancreatic cancer. It also found associations between these chemicals and birth defects, fetal death and intrauterine growth retardation. Perhaps most worrisome, it discovered that children exposed to pesticides—especially those used on lawns, fruit trees and gardens—have an increased risk of leukemia.

Taken as a package, these events suggest now is the time for action. The courts have said pesticide bylaws are valid; the polling shows a large majority of the public wants pesticides prohibited; and the science shows these chemicals pose a significant risk. What's needed to convert this into legislation is more advocacy work, especially on the part of health professionals.

Doctors have already played a key role in successful bylaw campaigns in a number of communities, including Halifax, Montreal, Peterborough, Toronto and Vancouver. They've explained the health hazards to politicians, spoken at public conferences, offered expert testimony to city committees, and written letters and opinion articles. But now we need them to come forward in a similar capacity in the many places—including Winnipeg, Regina, Edmonton and Calgary—where these poisons are not restricted.

We're at an extraordinary moment in Canadian history when non-toxic alternatives are supported by a convergence of law, science and public sentiment. Surely it's incumbent upon physicians, who enjoy a respect extended to few others, to seize this opportunity and advocate the most health-protective legislation possible.

If you would like more information about the Physicians' Pesticide Phase-Out Campaign, please call the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment at (416)306-2273 or visit our Web site (www.cape.ca).

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