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All the Junk That's Fit to Debunk

‘Poisoned Profits’: Recycled Junk Science

Posted on [August 7, 2008](#) | Comments Off

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August 7, 2008, [FoxNews.com](#)

Former New York Times environmental reporter Phil Shabecoff is so green he even recycles debunked health scares.

Shabecoff's new book, "Poisoned Profits: How Corporate America Is Poisoning Our Children With Toxic Chemicals," claims to "reveal the frightening and expanding dimension of children's chronic illnesses in the U.S. and link this epidemic to industrial toxins."

In attacking virtually every sort of industrial chemical, Shabecoff implies that almost all childhood illnesses, failed pregnancies and birth defects are attributable to the "42 billion pounds of chemicals per day" either made in or imported into the U.S.

Shabecoff asserts that industrial chemicals are barely regulated, companies "have knowingly put and kept toxic products on the market," children are more vulnerable to chemicals, "no one is safe," the health care costs attributable to chemicals exceed \$100 billion annually, and that the solution is to go "chemical free."

If Shabecoff's book were turned into a movie, however, it would have to be titled, "The Night of the Living Dead — Chemical Boogeyman Edition." Scares about all these substances have been debunked over and over during the last few decades.

This column has addressed most of the scares that Shabecoff tries to resurrect, including those about phthalates; bisphenol-A; flame retardants; triclosan; volatile organic compounds; PVC; PCBs; dioxin; pesticides; lead; mercury; rocket fuel; arsenic; antibiotics; and steroids.

Shabecoff's attempted resurrection of these scares isn't surprising given the usual suspects he digs up for interviews. They constitute a veritable Who's Who of Junk Science, many of whom have been featured at one time or another in this column including: Charlotte Brody (Health Care Without Harm); Carol Browner; Richard Clapp; Devra Davis; Lois Gibbs; Lynn Goldman; Tyrone Hayes; Michael Jacobson; Philip Landrigan; Bruce Lanphear; John Peterson Myers; Herbert Needleman; Ellen Silbergeld; Shanna Swan; and Walter Willett.

And if Shabecoff didn’t personally interview a junk scientist, he cited their anti-chemical activism. Some of these individuals include: Erin Brockovich; Rachel Carson; Theo Colburn; Ken Cook (Environmental Working Group); David Michaels; Arnold Schecter; and Neils Skakkebaek.

And if these sources aren’t enough to cast doubt on “Poisoned Profits,” then there’s Shabecoff, himself, whom the uber-liberal New York Times reassigned from environmental reporting in 1991 because he was too green.

Then-Times Washington bureau chief Howell Raines told Shabecoff, “New York is complaining. You’re too pro-environment and they say you’re ignoring the costs of environmental protection. They want you to cover the [Internal Revenue Service],” according to a 1998 report in *The Nation*.

Shabecoff subsequently quit the Times. “Poisoned Profits,” therefore, is precisely what one might expect from a biased journalist who depends on dubious and discredited sources to breathe life into alleged “problems” that have escaped scientific detection despite more than 40 years and tens of billions of dollars of research.

When you think about it, Shabecoff’s hypothesis is really incredible. He suggests that, because we make or import more chemicals than ever before, emissions, exposures and risks to health are greater than ever before.

“There is abundant evidence that the trillions of pounds of hazardous pollutants that have been poured into the environment are, in all likelihood, responsible for much of the sickness, suffering and, too often, death of America’s children,” he writes.

And in the grand environmentalist tradition of hyperbolic imagery, his media release states, “The effect on children’s health is like a World Trade Center in slow motion.” But the facts don’t match up with Shabecoff’s hysterics.

First, industrial emissions and the public’s exposure to them have declined over the past few decades. Air emissions declined 67 percent between 1993 and 2002, emissions of volatile organic compounds declined by 50 percent from 1980 to 2007, and overall industrial releases to the environment declined 59 percent between 1988 and 2006, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

Contrary to Shabecoff’s claim of deteriorating public health, life expectancy, the most objective standard for measuring health, is the highest it has ever been across all race, age and gender groups, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Overall cancer incidence and death rates are declining, and childhood cancer rates are stable, according to the National Institutes of Health. Most importantly, there is not a single study that credibly links typical or legal industrial emissions to the environment as a cause of any disease in anyone, including children.

Shabecoff wrestles with this fact early in his book when he writes that “Often ... the scientific evidence is cloudy.” But he quickly resolves his dilemma by suggesting a conspiracy among the chemical industry, politicians and government officials to ignore children’s health.

What follows are 200-plus pages of innuendo and half-truths. An example of Shabecoff’s penchant for omitting key facts arises when he praises environmental groups working “for” the children. He laments that “there is no sheriff leading this posse.”

He then nominates Mt. Sinai School of Medicine’s Philip Landrigan, “called by some the father of environmental pediatrics,” to assume the role. Landrigan chaired the National Research Council Committee that produced the 1993 “landmark” report Pesticides in the Diets of Infants and Children, a study that was used by activists to scare politicians into enacting the Food Quality Protection Act in 1996.

But anyone who actually read that report knows that it utterly failed to make any link between pesticides in food and health risk to children. Shabecoff’s hero was forced to publicly acknowledge in the wake of the report that “no disease has ever been documented that stems from legal applications of pesticides.”

The environmental scare movement started in 1962 with Rachel Carson’s anti-chemical screed, “Silent Spring.” It’s comforting to know that 46 years later the alarmist case against industrial chemicals remains evidence-free.

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