Opinion | A Bad Move That Could End Up Exposing Kids to Chemicals

Without explaining why, the E.P.A. has sidelined its top children's health advocate.

By Philip J. Landrigan and Lynn R. Goldman

Dr. Landrigan and Dr. Goldman are physicians long involved in public health policy.

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CreditMarta Monteiro

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Last week, the leadership of the Environmental Protection Agency took aim at its own Office of Children's Health Protection by placing its director, Dr. Ruth Etzel, a distinguished pediatrician and epidemiologist, on "administrative leave."

At first glance, the action might look like mere bureaucratic shuffling, though the agency, while saying she was not facing disciplinary action, offered no explanation for the move.

But we worry that it signals one of two actions: closing the office, which has argued for tougher regulations on industrial pollutants, or minimizing its role in rule-making. For its part, the E.P.A. says children's health programs are not in jeopardy. But there is no question that if Dr. Etzel is pushed aside, the chemical industry will benefit and America's children will be harmed.

In 1993, the National Academy of Sciences reported that children and especially infants in the womb are profoundly different from adults in how they are harmed by exposure to pesticides and other chemicals. The academy's Committee on Pesticides in the Diets of Infants and Children, of which one of us (Dr. Landrigan) was chairman, concluded that children are not merely little adults. They are uniquely sensitive and keeping them healthy requires special protections.

Exposure to even low levels of toxic chemicals during pregnancy and in the first years after birth can damage children's brains and other developing organs, leading to increased risk of learning disabilities, A.D.H.D., dyslexia, autism and breathing and reproductive problems. Laws and regulations aimed at protecting adult health do not protect children. The academy committee urged that federal pesticide law be fundamentally restructured to shield infants in the womb and young children from chemical harm.

Since then, Congress has passed two laws that contain explicit provisions protecting children's health. One of them, the Food Quality Protection Act of 1996, directed the E.P.A. to impose a child-protective safety benchmark in setting standards for pesticides used on food crops, a requirement that has reduced pesticide applications and led to the banning of several highly toxic chemicals.

The safeguards for children's health embedded in these laws are much needed in the United States today. Air pollution remains a problem and will worsen if the Trump administration succeeds in increasing coal combustion and relaxing vehicle emission standards. More than 80,000 chemicals are being used in food packaging, clothing, building materials, furniture, carpets, cleaning products, cosmetics, toys and baby bottles. They are also widespread in the environment. Among children aged 1 to 5, for instance, some 500,000 are estimated to have elevated levels of lead in their blood.

Exposure to chemicals is linked to a wide array of pediatric diseases. Lead and mercury can cause brain damage with loss of intelligence. Polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, are linked to reductions in children's intelligence and alterations in behavior. Baby boys exposed in the womb to phthalates, a chemical used in plastics, are at risk of birth defects in their reproductive organs and behavioral abnormalities. Prenatal exposure to brominated flame retardants, used in electronics and furniture, is linked to I.Q. reduction and shortening of attention span.

Prenatal exposure to the insecticide chlorpyrifos is associated with reduced head circumference at birth, developmental delays and cognitive impairments. The regulatory story of this chemical is particularly instructive about the E.P.A. under President Trump. Last year, Scott Pruitt, the agency's administrator at the time, declined to remove chlorpyrifos from the market despite the recommendation of the agency's own scientists, based on health studies that suggested it was harming children. In August, a federal appeals court ordered the agency to ban the chemical.

To shield children from these hazards, the E.P.A. formed the Office of Children's Health Protection in 1997, a year after passage of the Food Quality Protection Act. For more than two decades this office has played an outsize role in safeguarding children's health. It has worked with teachers and school boards to improve air quality in schools. It helped push the E.P.A. to strengthen risk assessments for carcinogens. It educates pediatricians, obstetricians and parents about how to reduce infants' chemical exposure.

It has also insisted that the E.P.A.'s plan for enforcing the 2016 Lautenberg Chemical Safety Act protect children's health. That law requires, among its other mandates, a risk-based review of all chemicals in commerce. In recent months, the office has played a critical role in trying to protect children from atmospheric mercury emissions from coal-fired power plants as the Trump administration reconsiders an Obama-era rule

regulating those discharges.

The Office of Children's Health Protection plays a vital role in safeguarding America's children — born and unborn — against toxic environmental hazards. It is a small but highly effective program that protects the health of all Americans by protecting the most vulnerable among us. Dismantling it could do irreparable harm.

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Correction: October 2, 2018

Because of an editing error, an earlier version of this article included an erroneous middle initial for one of its authors. She is Lynn R. Goldman, not Lynn G. Goldman.

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