

# Opinion: Children face health risks from non-essential use of pesticide

Ian Kucerak / Postmedia



Herbicide treated dandelions are seen during a press conference at Borden Park in Edmonton, Alberta on Friday, June 16, 2017.

Children in Edmonton are among the least protected in Canada when it comes to unnecessary exposure to pesticides. The recent decision by city council to permit the continued use of harmful pesticides in city parks and green spaces won't do much to help.

Following a review of Edmonton's integrated pest-management policy, councillors at their meeting earlier this month endorsed a recommendation to update a previous pesticide policy first adopted in 2004. To their

credit, the city is now promising to be more forthcoming with public information about where and when pesticides are used.

But missing from the revised policy is a commitment to avoid using harmful pesticides for routine, non-essential purposes.

That omission troubles local physicians. In peer-reviewed epidemiological studies, pesticides have been linked to birth defects and low birth weight among babies, learning disabilities and delays in motor development among children, and several different types of cancer as well as neurological impacts in adults. In many studies, the harmful effects in children were related to the exposure of their mothers during pregnancy or to the exposure of children at a young age. The health evidence amply justifies a precautionary approach to routine pesticide use.

Gaps, flaws and weakness in Health Canada's system of pesticide regulation undermine confidence in pesticide registration decisions. Missing data, inadequate attention to epidemiological studies, lack of evidence on cumulative exposures, failure to consider the effect of additives that intensify toxic effects, delays in re-evaluating older pesticides, lack of transparency — with its many shortcomings, the federal pesticide evaluation process is not reliably health-protective. Its limitations confirm the need for precaution in developing pest-management plans, even when pesticides have been officially registered for sale and use.

Some 80 per cent of Canadians now live in communities that have restrictions limiting the use of harmful pesticides in parks, on sports fields and in other public green spaces. Such policies work well.

In a 2018 case study by the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment (CAPE), parks managers across the country reported that they are well able to maintain priority green spaces in well-groomed and functional condition within available budgets without using the restricted pesticides. An environmental co-benefit of pesticide reduction is the protection of biodiversity.

Edmonton city council might have made a different decision on pesticide use if councillors took seriously the sustainability principles set out in the city's official environmental strategy, "The Way We Green," approved in 2011. One of the strategic actions adopted in that policy commits the city to make continuing efforts "to minimize and eventually eliminate the use of pesticides." It is very hard to see how a policy that keeps the riskier pesticides within reach for non-essential uses gets us any closer to that goal.

A poll conducted for the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment and Prevent Cancer Now in 2016 found that over 60 per cent of Albertans are worried about pesticide health risks and favour increased restrictions on unnecessary uses of pesticides. Understandably, people want to live in healthy communities where they and their children are not exposed to avoidable pesticide health risks.

Edmonton city council can act to reduce pesticide dangers facing children. There are safer products and alternative methods of weed control that don't put kids' health at risk, while keeping lawns and parks looking attractive. By no coincidence, the alternatives are also better for pets, wildlife, waterways and pollinating insects.

Edmonton is a wonderful city — dynamic and naturally blessed. It should not be a risky place for children to live, learn and grow. It is long past time for public policy in this city to catch up with the science on pesticide health risks.

*Raquel Feroe, MD, is a retired Edmonton specialist and a member of the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment (CAPE). Alvaro Osornio-Vargas, MD, PhD, is a professor in the Department of Paediatrics at the University of Alberta under the Children's Environmental Health Clinic. Randall McQuaker is pesticides director at CAPE.*