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John Howard, MD, Director  
National Institute for Occupational Safety and  
Health 395 E Street S.W. Suite 9200  
Patriots Plaza Building  
Washington, DC 20201

Reference: CDC-2013-0023; NIOSH 240-A

Dear Dr. Howard:

We are writing to you to comment on the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) draft document, “Update of NIOSH Carcinogen Classification and Target Risk Level Policy for Chemical Hazards in the Workplace.” As medical professionals and health scientists who share a focus on the worker and community health impacts of toxic chemicals, we commend NIOSH for this effort to modernize the agency’s policy and align it with the significant developments in the science of cancer and chemicals that have taken place since NIOSH’s carcinogen policy was first issued in 1978.

We strongly endorse NIOSH’s proposal to use the hazard assessments for carcinogen classification issued by the National Toxicology Program (NTP), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) rather than conducting a separate classification process (section 4). Our collective expertise suggests that most chemicals designated as carcinogens by these authoritative bodies will have occupational relevance. As such, we concur with NIOSH’s proposal to implement its efforts based on the assumption that all chemicals listed by these agencies will also need to be listed by NIOSH. Deviations from this process should be based on demonstrating that a carcinogen is not occupationally relevant, rather than the other way around (section 4.4) as it is extremely unlikely for any chemical that can be bought, sold or used to exist without first being extracted, manufactured, processed or otherwise used by workers. We urge NIOSH to establish a default in its policy to consider chemicals classified as carcinogens by NTP, IARC, or EPA to be occupationally relevant unless NIOSH is provided with compelling evidence to the contrary.

Under this new framework, we believe it is appropriate for NIOSH to determine the applicable Globally Harmonized System of Classification and Labeling (GHS) carcinogen category for all listed chemicals (section 4.2). We agree with NIOSH’s criteria for determining the appropriate GHS carcinogen categories for specific IARC, NTP and EPA classifications. We also strongly support NIOSH’s decision to use the classification from any of the three organizations that affords the most health protection. In our experience, differences in classifications among these organizations are often a matter of when the topic was last reviewed.

We strongly object to the proposal that an excess risk of 1 in 1,000 workers exposed to a specific carcinogen over a working life time is an acceptable “target” risk level for carcinogen
RELs (section 6). We believe that a “recommended” exposure limit for workers that NIOSH admits is “orders of magnitude” less protective than the levels considered safe for the general public contradicts and undermines NIOSH’s mission and goals as a Federal health agency. NIOSH’s recommendations should always support the highest level of protection for worker safety and health.
NIOSH can better inform individuals and policy makers, and support the Occupational Safety and Health Administration’s need to set Permissible Exposure Limits (PELs) by calculating exposure levels that correspond to a range of lifetime risks of cancer (e.g., one in 1,000, one in 10,000, and one in a million, etc.). NIOSH can serve this function without labeling this activity as setting recommended exposure limits (RELs).

We believe that the new NIOSH reviews of occupational carcinogens should include information on and the promotion of safer alternatives. While NIOSH supports eliminating the use of known hazards as the most effective industrial hygiene control strategy, the discussion of alternatives in the proposed policy is minimally addressed in two sentences throughout the entire document (one in the introduction, one in section 5.1). We urge NIOSH to give more weight to the importance of this prevention strategy in the policy by including a stand-alone section on the issue.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer input into this important policy to better prevent cancer among workers.

Sincerely,

From the United States

Arlene Blum, PhD, Executive Director  Green Science Policy Institute  Berkeley, CA

Julia G. Brody, PhD, Executive Director  Silent Spring Institute Newton, MA

David O. Carpenter, MD, Director Institute for Health and the Environment  University at Albany Rensselaer, NY

Lynn Carroll, PhD, Senior Scientist TEDX, The Endocrine Disruption Exchange Paonia, CO

Barry Castleman, ScD Environmental Consultant Garrett Park, MD

Richard Clapp, DSc MPH, Professor Emeritus Department of Environmental Health Boston University School of Public
Health Boston, MA
Theo Colborn, PhD, Founder  
TEDX, The Endocrine Disruption Exchange  
Paonia, CO

Devra Lee Davis, PhD, MPH, Founder and President  
Environmental Health Trust  
Teton Village, WY

Richard A. Denison, PhD, Senior  
Scientist Environmental Defense Fund  
Washington, DC

David Egilman, MD, MPH, Clinical Professor  
Department of Family Medicine  
Brown University  
President, Global Health Through Education Service & Training (GHETS.ORG) Attleboro, MA

Cathey E. Falvo, MD, MPH, Retired Professor and Chair  
Global Public Health  
New York Medical College  
Valhalla, NY

Adam M. Finkel, Sc.D, CIH, Senior Fellow and Executive Director Penn Program on Regulation, University of Pennsylvania and Professor of Environmental and Occupational Health  
Rutgers School of Public Health  
Director of Health Standards Programs, OSHA (1995-2000)

Arthur I. Frank, MD, PhD  
Drexel University School of Public Health  
Philadelphia, PA

Thomas H. Gassert, MD, MSc, Assistant Professor of Medicine University of Massachusetts Medical School  
Visiting Scientist in Occupational and Environmental Medicine Harvard University School of Public Health  
Boston, MA

Steven G. Gilbert, PhD, DABT, Director and Founder  
INND (Institute of Neurotoxicology & Neurological Disorders)  
Seattle, WA

Robert M. Gould, MD, Associate Adjunct Professor
Department of Obstetrics, Gynecology and Reproductive Sciences Director of Health Professional Outreach and Education Program on Reproductive Health and the Environment, UCSF School of Medicine San Francisco CA
Janet Gray, PhD, Professor  
Program in Science, Technology, and Society  
Vassar College  
Poughkeepsie, NY

Polly Hoppin, ScD, Research Professor  
Department of Work Environment  
University of Massachusetts Lowell  
Lowell, MA

Molly Jacobs, MPH, Senior Research Associate  
Lowell Center for Sustainable Production, University of Massachusetts  
Lowell Lowell, MA

Carol Kwiatkowski, PhD, Executive Director  
TEDX, The Endocrine Disruption Exchange Paonia, CO

Charles Levenstein, PhD, MS, Professor Emeritus of Work Environment  
University of Massachusetts Lowell;  
Adjunct Professor of Occupational Health  
Tufts University School of Medicine Boston, MA

Peter Orris, MD, MPH, Professor and Chief of Service  
Occupational and Environmental Medicine  
University of Illinois Hospital and Health Science System  
Chicago, IL

David Ozonoff, MD, MPH, Professor of Environmental Health  
Boston University School of Public Health  
Boston, MA

Julia Quint, PhD, Former Chief  
Hazard Evaluation System and Information Service (HESIS) Occupational Health Branch California Department of Public Health (Retired)  
Oakland, CA

Cora Roelofs, MS, ScD, Assistant Professor  
Department of Public Health and Community Medicine Community Health Program  
Tufts University  
Boston, MA

Monona Rossol, MS., MFA, Industrial Hygienist and President  
Arts, Crafts & Theater Safety, Inc.
Ruthann Rudel, MS, Research Director
Silent Spring Institute
Newton, MA

Jennifer Sass, PhD, Senior Scientist
Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) and Professorial Lecturer
George Washington University (SEIU Local 500)
Washington, DC

Ted Schettler, MD, MPH, Science Director
Science and Environmental Health Network
Bolinas, CA

Craig Slatin, ScD, MPH, Professor
Department of Community Health and
Sustainability University of Massachusetts Lowell
Editor, New Solutions, A Journal of Environmental and Occupational Health Policy
Lowell, MA

Patrice Sutton, MPH, Research Scientist
UCSF Program on Reproductive Health and the
Environment San Francisco, CA

Daniel Thau Teitelbaum, MD, Adjunct
Professor
Environmental Science, Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering
Colorado School of Mines
Golden, CO

Joel Tickner, ScD, Associate Professor
Department of Community Health and
Sustainability University of Massachusetts Lowell
Lowell, MA

Peter Wilk, MD
Psychiatrist in private practice
Portland, ME

Yolanda Whyte, MD, President
Dr. Yolanda Whyte Pediatrics
Atlanta, GA

From Around the World

Pierre L. Auger, MD, Msc, FRCP, CSPQ, Clinical
Professor Occupational Medicine, Laval University
Québec, Canada
Xaver Baur, MD, Professor
Institute for Occupational Medicine Charité University Medicine
Berlin, Germany
European Society for Occupational and Environmental Medicine

Dr Fiorella Belpoggi, Director
Cesare Maltoni Cancer Research Centre Ramazzini Institute
Bologna, Italy

Luc Bhérer MD, Occupational medicine specialist Occupational Medicine, Laval University
Québec, Canada

James T. Brophy, PhD, Adjunct Assistant Professor University of Windsor
Windsor, Canada

Lygia Therese Budnik, PhD, Professor University of Hamburg
Hamburg, Germany
European Society for Occupational and Environmental Medicine

Evelyne Cambron-Goulet, MD, MSc, FRCPC, Public Health and Preventive Medicine Specialist Assistant Professor Département des sciences de la santé communautaire Université de Sherbrooke Québec, Canada

Sanjay Chaturvedi MD, FAMS, FIPHA, FIAPSM, Professor of Community Medicine University College of Medical Sciences Delhi, India

André Cicolella, Scientific Advisor National Institute of Risks and Environment (INERIS) Verneuil-en-Halatte, France

Mohamed Aqiel Dalvie, BSc, Hons, MSc, PhD, Associate Professor and Director Centre for Occupational & Environmental Health Research (COEHR) School of Public Health & Family Medicine Health Sciences Faculty, University of Cape Town Cape Town, South Africa

Pierre Deshaies, MD, MSc, CSPQ, FRCPC, Public Health and Preventive Medicine
Specialist Professeur de clinique
Département de médecine sociale et preventive
Faculté de médecine, Université Laval
Québec, Canada
T.K. Joshi, FRCS, FFOM, Director
OEM Programme, Centre for Occupational and Environmental Health, New Delhi, India
Fellow, Collegium Ramazzini, Italy
Visiting Professor, Drexel University School of Public Health, Philadelphia, PA

Dr Lennart Hardell, MD, PhD, Professor
Department of Oncology, University Hospital Örebro, Sweden

Margaret M. Keith, PhD, Adjunct Assistant Professor
University of Windsor
Windsor, Canada

Élisabeth Lajoie, MD, MSc, Spécialiste en santé publique et médecine préventive (FRCPC) Spécialiste en médecine du travail (CMQ), Professeur d’enseignement Clinique Université de Sherbrooke
Quebec, Canada

Denis Laliberté, MD, MPH, FRCPC, Public health and preventive medicine specialist
Professor in occupational health
Laval University
Quebec City, Canada

Abby Lippman, PhD, Professor Emerita
Department of Epidemiology, Biostatistics, and Occupational Health
McGill University
Montreal, Canada

Donna Mergler, Professor emerita
Department of Biological Sciences and Centre for Interdisciplinary Research on Health and Well-being, Society and Environment (CINBIOSE)
Université du Québec à Montréal
Montreal, Canada

Jonny Myers, Professor
Centre for Occupational and Environmental Health
Research School of Public Health, University of Cape Town
Cape Town, South Africa

Dr. Celstino Panizza, Occupational Physician
National Health Service - Azienda Sanitaria Locale - Health Protection Service Workplaces Unit Brescia, Italy

Colin L. Soskolne, PhD, Professor Emeritus
University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada
Adjunct Professor, Faculty of Health, University of
Canberra, Canberra, Australia
Susan Stock, MD MSc FRCPC, Occupational Medicine Specialist
Occupational Health Unit, Québec Institute of Public Health, and
Clinical professor, Department of Social and Preventive Medicine, University of
Montréal Montreal, Canada

Barbara Tessier, MD MSc Médecin Conseil
Équipe de promotion de la santé physique et psychosociale Direction de santé publique de
Chaudière-Appalaches Sainte Marie, Québec

Jim teWaterNaude, MBChB, MPhil (MCH), FCPHM, Public Health Medicine Specialist Cape Town, South Africa

Annie Thébaud-Mony, PhD, Director of Research Emeritus INSERM (National Institute for Health and Medical Research)
IRIS/GISCOP93 (occupational cancer research group), Université Paris Bobigny, France

Heinz Walter Thielmann, Prof. Dr. med. Dr. rer. nat. Deutsches Krebsforschungszentrum Heidelberg
Heidelberg, Germany

Alice Turcot, MD, MSc, FRCPC, Occupational Medicine Specialist Département de médecine sociale et préventive, Faculté de médecine, Université Laval
Québec, Canada

Fernand Turcotte, MD, MPH, FRCPC, Professor Emeritus of Public health and Preventive Medicine
Medical School Université Laval, Québec, Canada

Hans-Joachim Woitowitz, MD, Professor Emeritus & former Director of the Institute and Outpatient clinic of Occupational and Social Medicine
University of Giessen
Giessen, Germany

Michel Vézina, MD, MPH, CSPQ, FRCPC, Public Health and Preventive Medicine Specialist Professor at the Social and Preventive Medicine Department
Faculty of Medicine, Laval University
Québec, Canada

Laurent Vogel, Researcher
European Trade Union
Institute Brussels, Belgium