

Interview

Dr. Devra Lee Davis World Resources Institute

Dr. Devra Lee Davis is one of the nation's foremost experts on the links between environmental pollutants and chronic diseases. In 1994, she was nominated by President Clinton and confirmed by the Senate to serve on the Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board, which was established by Congress in 1990 to investigate the causes of chemical accidents.

You are a member of the Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board, funding for which was cut by Congress and President Clinton this year. What role was the board to have played in preventing chemical accidents?

It still can play an important role. Let me stress that. I and two other nominees were appointed by the president for five-year terms and unanimously confirmed by the Senate. The board still does exist, and the only way it will cease to exist is if the Clean Air Act is rolled back. But, since we have no money, we can't operate.

Regarding the role of the Board, we can prevent accidents by investigating the causes of the ones that do happen. The best example of this is in the role of the National Transportation Safety Board, which investigates airplane accidents. Chemical plants are often complicated, but there are some common things that go wrong.

Unfortunately, when five workers are killed in a

chemical explosion in Lodi, New Jersey, it doesn't make headline news. But, if those five people died in a plane crash, that's big news.

What impacts do chemical accidents have on public health?

Do chemical accidents play a large role in affecting public health? No. But they do play a completely preventable role. The question is a moral and ethical one. We have to ask ourselves if it's right to subject a small number of people to a very great, and largely avoidable, risk. I don't think that we need to overstate the risk to public health. But we do have to ask whether it's right to put people at such a risk.

You mentioned at a recent conference that "we can't afford not to invest more in prevention" of cancer and other diseases of the environment. What steps can we take to prevent these diseases?

We have to do a better job of education in the workplace and in the home. People have a right to know about the hazards they're exposed to. One recent survey found that 80% of women used pesticides while pregnant because they didn't know that the flea collar or the no-pest strip they use contained pesticides. We've got to do a better job of getting the information out, a better job of labelling.

There's been a good deal of debate recently on the links



between rising rates of certain cancers and other health problems and exposure to organochlorines. What is your opinion?

There are some people who have said that there has been no increase in cancer rates, except for that which is due to smoking. When you look at the death rate, you see that it's dropped because smoking-related deaths have declined, at least among white men. However, new cases of cancer not tied to smoking are increasing, although many of them are curable.

A study that we had published in the Journal of the American Medical Association found that men of the baby boomer generation are getting three to four times more new cases of cancers that aren't related to smoking than their grandfathers. There is definitely something going on, and it's due to preventable exposures. I should add that it's not just organochlorines, but there are many other exposures that may play a role in all this. ♦

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