The unhealthy emphasis on economics

Is there too much focus on the costs of reducing exposure to chemicals of concern?

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In June, I attended the European Commission's workshop in Brussels on the strategy for a non-toxic environment, part of the 7th Environment Action Programme (7EAP).

Unfortunately, and unsurprisingly, discussions focused on finding economically sustainable strategies for substituting chemicals of concern.

At the workshop, some speakers invited participants to leave the past behind and think of the future in terms of innovative chemical substitution and its financial implications.

Finding alternatives to hazardous chemicals to prevent future exposures is, of course, very important. It is also true that scientists have decided to take on the challenge of redesigning pharmaceuticals with the concept of "benign by design" in mind. But this can sometimes mean changing the very structure of the original molecule, because they still have to function as a drug.

We all want green chemicals that are biodegradable and that don't harm the environment. But are we there yet? Definitely not, due to the fact that the process of redesigning old molecules takes time.

While this process continues, one must take into consideration that people have been exposed to toxic chemicals for several decades now, which, without question, requires consideration of the past. The consequences of past exposure to chemicals are visible long into the future, with impacts on future generations.

According to a 2012 Unep report, thousands of active chemical substances, together with their metabolites and transformation products have been found in water, soil, sewage, and other environmental matrices over the last few decades, impacting both wildlife and human health. The environment is already heavily polluted and with chemical production increasing, we are more exposed every day.

Just as we are dealing with the consequences of past chemical exposure today, so too will today's pollution affect future generations.

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Therefore, there is an urgent need to empower patients, the healthcare sector and community actors to influence policy makers to take action. Chemical exposure is not just a bad memory from the past; it is happening right now across the world.

Through air pollution, exposure to chemicals kills over seven million people each year, according to a recent WHO report. But taking measures to protect the environment from chemical pollution doesn't seem to be a priority for policy-makers and legislators.

In the EU, there is a fragmented policy approach towards chemicals and their presence in the environment, which continues to threaten the health of citizens.

There is a need to encourage innovation in terms of finding new ways to tackle chemical exposure in its early stages. People, when sick, seek their healthcare professional; they do not knock at the door of industry, governments or regulators.

These people in need of healthcare aren't thinking about this economics when they arrive at the hospital. Currently, it seems that industry and government officials only see one side of the story, the one that benefits their interests, and, of course, nobody wants to be held responsible for the suffering of people who have been affected by exposure to chemicals.

In the view of stakeholders and regulators, the waste treatment costs and those related to finding new alternatives for hazardous chemicals represent huge investments for industry and society in general.

However, according to WHO, the real economic burden is in the costs associated with treating the effects of chemicals in people. The organisation reports that, per year, occupational cancer deaths in Italy were estimated to cost around €360m in indirect economic loss, and this amounted to €456m for healthcare. The report says occupational lung and bladder cancer cost the Spanish national health system €88m. In France, it says, occupational respiratory cancers were also shown to be a considerable economic burden. The total cost of occupational asthma in the UK was estimated at between £95m and £135m.

Legislation is currently needed to limit the discharge of chemicals into the environment. All stakeholders involved in the production, management, and legislation of chemicals need to think, not only about a future in which 'green' chemicals will be produced, but to take steps to tackle today's chemical exposure.

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