



Burnaby-New Westminster MP Peter Julian is proposing a bill that would require potentially toxic products to be labelled.

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Burnaby's Mae Burrows was in Ottawa last week giving a product demo of sorts to federal members of parliament.

She held up a can of soup and read the label's healthy ingredients like vegetables and chicken.

But there's something missing from the label, she told them.

It's bisphenol A (BPA), used inside the can to prevent corrosion and contamination. BPA is the same chemical found in plastic water bottles that Canadian stores recently pulled off shelves because of health concerns.

Burrows told the MPs that BPA, used to make the resin lining cans, is considered benign by manufacturers.

But a growing group of scientists say leaching BPA is a hormone disruptor, interfering with our bodies' natural hormone systems, she added.

BPA and its potential risks have been known for years, but it's been allowed in products because quantities are considered so low.

"But that's exactly the problem," says Burrows, who is executive director of the group Toxic Free Canada.

Chemicals like BPA can accumulate in us after decades of low exposure.

"Think of how delicate our hormonal system is," she says.

"It can change it."

CHEMICAL REACTION

Burrows isn't calling for a ban on these kinds of chemicals overnight.

Last week, her goal was to convince politicians to pass a "Right-to-know" bill.

This would require product labels to include all chemical ingredients and more importantly, a description of possible health effects—similar to labels found on cigarette packages.

Her request isn't far-fetched: the European Union and the State of California already have similar laws.

And Burrows has a local supporter in her corner.

Last Wednesday, Burnaby-New Westminster MP Peter Julian tabled a private members bill in the House of Commons calling for the new labelling regime.

"This bill is based on a common-sense approach," says Julian. "When consumers purchase a product, they have a right to be informed of what might be dangerous to their health or the environment."

RIGHT TO KNOW

**MANY HOUSEHOLD PRODUCTS
—EVEN FOOD—HAVE TOXIC INGREDIENTS.
SOME SAY IT'S TIME FOR MANUFACTURERS
TO COME CLEAN**

MORE THAN SKIN DEEP

Canned products aren't the only source of toxins, says Burrows.

Look in any bathroom to find cosmetics, skin and health care products that contain a variety of toxic risks.

Studies have found mercury in mascara and chemicals in lipstick that result in neurotoxicity, which alters the normal activity of the nervous system, causing damage to nervous tissue.

There are also scent products like perfume and shampoo with toxins that affect female reproduction and fetus development. Called phthalates, these chemicals are used to make a scent last longer.

Burrows says these cosmetics pose a real challenge.

The ingredients are considered proprietary: meaning manufacturers don't tell the public what chemicals they contain because they're protecting their trade secrets.

"What's hard for people to get their minds around is that for so long ordinary people, using ordinary products that they thought were safe, are being exposed more and more over time," she says.

Burrows compares it to second-hand smoke: It used to be considered harmless, and now there are laws in place to protect people from it.

IT'S JUST A PHASE

Julian and Burrows aren't the only ones calling for right-to-know legislation.

Environmental Defence made the issue personal in 2006 when it analyzed the toxins found in various Canadians, including federal politicians.

Testing was done on blood and urine samples of individuals, including B.C. MLA Gregor Robertson's family.

The Robertsons eat mostly organic food, so one would assume lower levels of toxins.

But that wasn't the case.

Of the seven children studied across Canada, Johanna (15 at the time) and Satchel Robertson (13) had the highest levels of toxins. Thirty-two of 68 chemicals tested for were found in Joanna while 28 were detected in Satchel.

This information led Environmental Defence to conclude no one is immune to accumulating toxins, no matter how healthy their lifestyle.

The group wants to go a step further than the right-to-know legislation, seeking to have toxins gradually phased out.

Those in the plastics and consumer products industries argue right-to-know legislation would cause confusion. It would result in self-imposed consumer bans on products that contain small amounts of toxins but are considered safe. They

also say they would be hard-hit economically.

That may be so, says Julian. But the industry would quickly adapt and switch to safer ingredients.

Burrows agrees, using perfume sold in Europe as an example. When phthalates were banned there, alternatives were found.

"In Europe they quickly figured out how to make perfume without it through reformulation," she says.

Her hope is companies producing consumer products will begin taking voluntary steps and start reformulating products containing toxins before regulations force them to do so. But until products become toxic free, it's up to the consumer. Read labels and find out more about the ingredients, says Burrows.

"Even then we just don't know since not everything is listed. That's why we have a right to know."

■ For more about toxins in consumer products visit www.toxicfreecanada.ca or the Environmental Defence web page at www.toxicnation.ca. For a differing point of view, the Canadian Plastics Industry Association is at www.cpia.ca and the website for the The Canadian Consumer Specialty Products Association is www.ccsipa.org.

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