

How Everyday Products Make People Sick: Toxins at Home and in the Workplace

Paul D. Blanc

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Nothing less than an extraordinarily documented tapestry of history, whodunit, who ignored it, and why it matters, this examination of everyday toxins is a revealing and compelling read.

The author challenges conventional views of workplace and environmental hazards as new phenomena by trailing manufacturing processes like a crime scene investigator during prime time. He examines old medical reports and draws new conclusions based on modern research illustrating the often meandering trends of chemical and technological processes as they interweave with economic and political pressures. The hazards of manufacturing and using everyday products are thoroughly detailed.

Blanc, a professor of medicine who holds the endowed chair in Occupational and Environmental medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, traces specific chemical processes from their ancient origins to their use and abuse in the modern workplace. His experience in public health makes him uniquely qualified to spotlight these hazards.

He illustrates how benzene, a common and hazardous solvent, became increasingly popular at the end of World War II because of its essential abilities as a solvent and despite its health risks. Early methods of producing benzene were replaced by petrochemical industry developments making its production more efficient. "There was an awful lot on the market to be unloaded," Blanc says.

It was used to make the rubber cement used by shoemakers and they, "more than any other working group, paid the price," Blanc says. He describes the links between benzene and leukemia as documented by a 1964 article in *The New England Journal of Medicine* and notes how the same author had made the same connections in a 1938 article.

Blanc describes rare disease outbreaks that happen because something is changed by unsuspecting researchers trying to improve a product. This happened in 2001 when it was discovered that a factory making microwave popcorn with a butter flavoring turned out to cause a previously rare disease among workers.

These emerging toxins are not limited to factories, either. Blanc described how an aerosol spray for protecting leather was discovered to cause a kind of pneumonia in some people who used it. Less than a year later, another household product was linked to the same disease. The products were recalled; something that doesn't always happen when economic forces and political pressures protect markets and industries from public inquiry.

Although this book is more about the hazards of manufacturing than about household toxins, it will appeal to a broader audience than its title suggests. Compelling from environmental, public health and medical viewpoints, it is an indictment of industrial malfeasance. It is not alarmist and is more history than hysterics.

JOE MIELKE (February 8, 2007)

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