

This story is taken from www.latimes.com/news/opinion

OPINION

Time to fix a cure

Thirty years ago, California outlawed a fire retardant in children's clothes, only to allow it in furniture. It's time for a full ban.

July 28, 2007

Thirty years ago, scientists revealed that the primary fire retardant used in children's pajamas was likely to cause cancer. Parents panicked, and brominated Tris was banned from sleepwear. Its replacement, chlorinated Tris, was later found to be a mutagen -- altering DNA. Now scientists are warning that the chemicals we removed from clothing saturate the foam in our furniture.

In 1975, California passed a law requiring that the foam inside upholstered furniture be able to withstand an open flame for 12 seconds without igniting. Many manufacturers responded by adding chlorinated Tris to their foam, though other brominated or chlorinated chemicals are also in use, all of which have questionable health effects. Virtually every Californian tested has shown high levels of these chemicals in his or her body. They migrate from the furniture into dust particles and find their way into children, pets and the breast milk of nursing mothers.

Assemblyman Mark Leno (D-San Francisco) is sponsoring a bill, AB 706, that bans all chlorinated and brominated fire retardants from use in furniture. There is considerable evidence that this entire class of chemicals is dangerous, according to Arlene Blum, the chemist who first demonstrated the hazards of Tris. The bill also would require the state Bureau of Home Furnishings to consider the toxicity of chemicals used to meet fire safety standards.

The bromine industry argues that most of the studies of its chemicals have been performed on animals, that there's no evidence of ill health effects on humans and that chemicals should be judged on a case-by-case basis. Yet other brominated fire retardants besides Tris have proved toxic, such as the two types of polybrominated diphenyl ethers that were banned in California in 2004 after studies showed they migrate to breast milk and could cause brain damage. Firefighters have significantly higher rates of cancer than the general population, and some scientists think that's because they're exposed to toxins released when these fire retardants burn.

California's 32-year-old furniture law was intended to reduce deaths that result when smokers fall asleep with lighted cigarettes. It was a well-meaning measure, but it didn't take into account the health and environmental hazards of certain classes of fire retardants.

Leno's bill would eliminate a health threat without significant cost to consumers or industry, because there are safe alternatives available at a competitive price.