RESULTS OF NATIONAL NURSES’ HEALTH AND CHEMICAL EXPOSURES SURVEY

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Abstract: Caring for patients during a typical workday, nurses handle dozens of chemicals, drugs, and other agents that are designed to prevent, diagnose, control, or cure diseases and other health conditions. These therapeutic agents can heal, but have side effects as well. For patients, the benefits of tightly controlled doses usually outweigh the risks. But, the same may not be true for nurses. In a 2005 on-line survey of over 1500 nurses conducted jointly by Health Care Without Harm (HCWH) and the Environmental Working Group (EWG), in collaboration with the American Nurses Association and the Environmental Health Education Center of the University of Maryland's School of Nursing, the objective was to identify if there were any potential health risks for nurses who everyday absorb a small fraction of the substances they use to care for patients. To date, any rigorous research in this area of study has not been done. The sponsoring organizations hope that this survey’s results will serve as a catalyst to encourage such research by both the federal government and environmental scientists. The nurses reported detailed workplace exposures and health histories that suggest significant links between nurses' long-term exposures to such hazards as cleaning, disinfecting, and sterilizing agents, radiation, mercury, antineoplastics and similar potent medications and other chemicals and the nurses' health problems. A total of 730 different health conditions ranging from contact dermatitis to migraines, diabetes, asthma, depression and brain cancer were reported by the nurses. Data also suggest that nurses' exposures to hazards may be associated with developmental and health problems in their children as well. This indicates the need for formal controlled studies by NIOSH or other groups of nurses' and their families' health and the nurses' chemical exposures in the workplace.

Keywords: Environmental health risks, workplace exposures, nurses’ health problems

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