



## **Banning BPA without proof it's harmful is a tempest in a test-tube**

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The federal government is using a dangerously narrow definition of risk in its decision to restrict the use of a Bisphenol A, a chemical that has been in common use for more than a generation in the manufacture of thousands of common items.

Ottawa announced last week it intends to make Canada the first country in the world to label Bisphenol A, or BPA, a dangerous substance. The feds will ban its use in polycarbonate baby bottles and limit its use in other food containers.

In so doing, the Conservative government is betraying the very principle it pretends to avow, that of precaution. The precautionary principle requires that in the face of scientific uncertainty, we should err on the side of not making any changes that could potentially threaten human health or the environment.

The scientific advisory panel that recommended BPA be listed as a dangerous substance said it was using a precautionary approach to often conflicting or inconclusive research in reaching its conclusion.

It found that although BPA, which is used in the production of polycarbonates, such as the hard clear plastic used in water bottles, breaks down quickly in the environment, it can accumulate in sewage sludge and enter rivers and streams with the potential to harm fish and aquatic organisms. This harm, like the potential harm to humans, has never been documented in nature, only extrapolated from laboratory experiments.

Similarly, the conflicting evidence about the potential for harm to humans is based on laboratory experiment on animals. There are no documented cases of any harm to humans from the ordinary use of products manufactured with BPA.

So there is no real-world evidence of harm. The experimental evidence is that there is the potential for harm to infants and children, although we don't know how much exposure to BPA it would take to harm an infant since there are no documented cases to work with despite the millions of children who have been exposed at some level.

Commenting on the announcement, Environment Minister John Baird said "When it comes to Canada's environment, you can't put a price on safety."

This utter nonsense reflects the recklessness of the whole approach being taken by the government. It ignores completely the fact that what is being considered here is not a new chemical that some nasty company is threatening to unleash into the environment. What BPA represents is a well-established, well-tolerated compound that is currently making a substantial contribution to both human health and the economy through the products in which it is found.

Amid the political rhetoric, the federal government conceded the general public need not be concerned about any health risk from using products containing BPA. You do not need to throw away all of your polycarbonate water bottles and rush out to buy new ones.

As we saw in the days leading up to the announcement, however, during which several major retailers pulled products containing BPA off the shelves without waiting for the details, this action will have serious repercussions.

It will not be, as some organizations pushing for a ban on BPA have suggested, just the

replacement of dangerous goods with others that are completely benign. There will be many ripple effects as manufacturers come up with new products. Some will be more expensive, others will have yet to be assessed for environmental or health risks.

The precautionary principle would suggest we should not provoke such large-scale changes without proof that we are not causing other harms. We have no such proof. What we have is a tempest in a test-tube that may yet blow up in our faces.

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