

Battle looms on chemicals

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Did you know that we have some 300 chemicals in our bodies that our grandparents didn't have? Many of these have accumulated over years from among the thousands of chemicals we now use unthinkingly in our daily lives.

At the same time, there have been dramatic increases in asthma, skin diseases, and certain types of cancer—as well as declines in the sperm count among men. Often, we don't know which chemical has been responsible for what effect.

Medical evidence suggests that it is now time to double-check several thousand chemicals which we had previously assumed were relatively harmless.

Such a comprehensive testing programme is, of course, expensive. That's one reason to do it at EU level, rather than having 25 separate national programmes that duplicate each other. Still, industry has been lobbying heavily against this programme. The Commission estimates that it would cost €2.3 billion over eleven years, while bringing savings of €50 billion over 30 years—and those are just the economic benefits. All this in an industry with an annual turnover of more than €500 billion per year!

Even the chemical industry itself stands to save. It currently loses €60 million a year from people on sick leave due to skin irritations.

I met members of the Yorkshire WWF and Women's Institute on this matter in Brussels. They presented a petition with 77 000 signatures as well as the results of tests on their own bodies which found their blood to be contaminated with a cocktail of toxic, man-made chemicals.

I also had lunch with Commissioner Margot Wallström, the Swedish Socialist Commissioner responsible for this proposal. Commissioner Wallström, backed by Parliament, is determined to see the programme approved and underway as soon as possible.

Her enthusiasm may be partly down to the fact that she had her own blood tested and found 28 manmade chemicals, including a toxic pesticide banned since 1983, and flame retardants found in TVs, carpets and furniture!