



May 2008

## Activism

### Harnessing Action and Compassion

#### Center for Environmental Health Challenges

#### Big Business to Create a Healthier World



Ask parents about lead in toys, and many may share horror stories of Christmas 2007, when, rife with anxiety, they sought safe, nontoxic gifts for their children. Ask Target, Wal-Mart and Toys 'R' Us officials, and they'll likely remember hasty recalls and shelf-clearing purges as they reassured panicky consumers of product safety. Ask staff members of the Center for Environmental Health, and they will say they were just doing their job when their testing raised the alarm about excessive lead levels in toys just in time to shake up holiday shopping.

What is this tiny nonprofit that has big business thinking twice about consumer safety?

Mostly it's a dozen hard-working people, in a humble cottage on a quiet street in Oakland, taking on monumental environmental health issues. The CEH has successfully challenged corporate giants and government bodies in pursuit of healthier lives for individuals,

families and communities around the world. The inspired leader of this small but mighty nonprofit, Michael Green, received a 2007 Compassion in Action Award from the Committee of 100 for Tibet and the Dalai Lama Foundation. He staunchly believes action and compassion are crucial for solving the environmental health issues CEH tackles on a worldwide basis.

Taking a global perspective, Green explains there are more than 80,000 chemicals in what he calls the international "chain of commerce"—the interwoven strands of business that bind together the manufacturing process, point of purchase and, finally, the disposal of products. The first link of the chain begins with the men, women and, often, children who toil in manufacturing plants (many in impoverished nations around the globe), and ends in the homes and dumps of well-to-do consumers in developed countries. All along the chain, these thousands of potentially harmful chemicals are seeping into human bodies and water sources, air and earth. The vast majority of these chemicals have never been tested for their health impact, but the health dangers of some have been well known for a number of years. And yet they continue to be detected in a wide range of products at unacceptable levels. Take lead, for example. Although the United States has banned lead-based paints for years, lead in children's toys persists as a problem in this country. Exposure to lead affects mental and behavioral development in small children; even a small dose can have a negative

impact. Taking up the slack for understaffed and under-funded federal agencies, CEH tests for lead in a variety of products using the X-ray fluorescence analyzer in its Oakland headquarters and confirms with independent labs. Finding the lead is the first, and easiest, step in consumer protection.

Raising the alarm and, more importantly, demanding changes along the chain of commerce is far more challenging. This is where action becomes more than just a word and exactly where CEH efforts have produced significant results. This tiny nonprofit has powerful legal recourse to confront retailers who import and sell tainted products, thanks to California Proposition 65. This proposition, passed in 1986, mandates that the citizens of California have the right to be informed about exposure to chemicals that cause birth defects, cancer or reproductive harm. It also addresses enforcement of laws on dangerous chemicals and actions that pose a risk to public health and safety, and it places the burden for correction on offenders. CEH literally takes this law into its own hands when lead-tainted products are discovered. In the past decade, the organization has filed notices (of intention) to sue hundreds of times over. During that time CEH has taken on industry giants Wal-Mart, Johnson & Johnson, Walt Disney Company, Toys 'R' Us and Target over lead, not only in toys, but in lunchboxes, baby powder and bibs, as well. Because of these efforts, these products are no longer on store shelves. But lead contamination of the environment can come in more subtle and surprising ways.

For example, Caroline Cox, research director at CEH, says 500,000 pounds of lead enter the California environment every year from tire weights. "The weights that balance tires fall off, are ground up and create dust that enters water, soil and houses," she says. Chrysler, a manufacturer of tire weights, is a defendant in pending legal action. The goal is to push Chrysler to switch tire-weight material to steel, which although slightly more expensive, is far less toxic to the surrounding environment.

Ultimately, and perhaps ironically, CEH staff contends that it is in the best financial interest of companies that produce and sell these products to have safety issues raised. "Companies want consumers to trust their products. They do not want to risk losing market share or suffering damage to their brand image," says Green, suggesting that, based upon his dealings with the likes of Wal-Mart, many "companies are ready to be regulated, perhaps more than the federal government is ready to impose regulations."

Green acknowledges that his staff of 12 is hardly in the position to fill in all the gaps created by lack of government enforcement of standards and regulations. But the diverse interests and expertise available at CEH translates into a myriad of projects broadly addressing environmental health issues and consumer and community concerns. In many cases, these are action- and compassion-oriented initiatives designed to empower low-income populations traditionally lacking political and business clout.

Christine Cordero, community health coordinator, says, "When you protect those with the least, you protect everyone." Cordero sees her role as "translating science for community activists, creating access to education and providing direction on how to be good environmental allies." Sue Chaing, pollution prevention director, expands on CEH's notion of action and compassion, describing current CEH activities targeting the disposal and recycling of electronic waste. "Computers aren't designed for recycling," she says. Even though consumers feel virtuous responding to e-waste collection drives, problems plague the recycling process further down the line. Chaing says many e-waste centers send used computers to China, for example, where they are disassembled by a cheap labor force. Children and prisoners, with no legal or health protections, are exposed to numerous toxic chemicals and heavy metals as they break computers down into smaller components.

To reduce the individual and environmental exposure to toxic hazards inherent in these working conditions, CEH works with large institutional purchasers of computers and other electronic products to encourage a market demand for safe, sustainable manufacturing and disposal practices. Chaing works as a liaison between Health Care Without Harm and the Computer TakeBack Campaign, which targets the hospital industry to facilitate policy changes that protect workers who produce electronics, users and communities where e-waste is discarded or recycled. One of CEH's corporate partners in this effort is the Kaiser Health Care System, a major player in the chain of commerce that can exert tremendous influence on manufacturing and disposal policies.

Ansje Miller, policy director, emphasizes that CEH's approach is more carrot than stick. For example,

Miller says, the CEH is working on the Green Chemistry Initiative with the governor, an initiative more about safer chemicals than outright chemical bans. CEH unfalteringly applies an action-and-compassion approach to production, consumption and disposal of the everyday necessities and luxuries many take for granted, reminding consumers they play a key role in addressing the environmental health issues that impact every link in the chain of commerce.

Charlie Pizarro, CEH associate director, says, “I was raised to believe we all have obligations. It is more than an economic decision; it is an ethics decision, where we buy products. It is conscious purchasing.” And it is having choices.

Cox, the research director, concurs. “The thing that ties it all together, that is the most important, is alternatives—alternatives to toxins. We at CEH believe when you give people [including big business] choices and reasons to use alternatives, they are happy to make the switch,” she says. “There is no logical reason to put lead in lunchboxes [or toys]. When you can change industry and how it does business, from a legal and health perspective, that is really exciting.”

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## SEE IT

Take a look at *The Story of Stuff*: “A 20-minute fast-paced, fact-filled look at the underside of our production and consumption patterns. *The Story of Stuff* exposes the connections between a huge number of environmental and social issues and calls us together to create a more sustainable and just world.”

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## LEARN IT

- The Center for Environmental Health is primarily funded through private donations and grants. For more information, see [www.cehca.org](http://www.cehca.org), 528 61st St., Suite A, Oakland, California, 94609, (510) 594-1204.
- Computer TakeBack Campaign is an effort to protect the health and well-being of communities where electronics are manufactured and discarded by requiring companies to take responsibility for the full lifecycle of their computer products. [www.computertakeback.com](http://www.computertakeback.com)
- The California Green Chemistry Initiative is an initiative that targets innovation in science that will reduce the prevalence of toxic chemicals in products that may harm the public or contaminate the environment. [www.dtsc.ca.gov/PollutionPrevention/GreenChemistryInitiative](http://www.dtsc.ca.gov/PollutionPrevention/GreenChemistryInitiative)
- Health Care Without Harm is an international coalition of more than 450 organizations in 50-plus countries focused on reducing toxic pollution in the healthcare industry, such as hospitals and physician offices. [www.noharm.org/us](http://www.noharm.org/us)

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