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Thursday, February 03, 2005

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Tuesday, March 30, 2004

We should all be mad as hatters over mercury

By Chronicle editorial board

Most of us know of the Mad Hatter from Lewis Carroll's book, "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland," however few are aware that it derived from a disease which afflicted workers in the felt hat industry of the 1800s, an industry that used mercury in the manufacturing process. The hatters suffered from excitability, mental instability, tremors, depression and personality disorders.

We all have mercury levels in our tissues, but pregnant mothers, nursing infants, and young children are at greatest risk from chronic mercury poisoning, a condition that can produce reduced motor skills, mental retardation and other birth defects. Despite worldwide and EPA scientific studies of mercury's hazards, the Bush administration is planning to relax rules on mercury pollution. Because mercury is not biodegradable, it continues to accumulate in the ecosystem, particularly in high amounts in fish and in the birds and animals who eat them. Thus humans, as the end of the food chain, have become contaminated.

Coal- and fire-fired power generation, and industrial processes such as battery manufacturing, create mercury compounds that are toxic, even at extremely low levels of exposure. In the face of this the Holcim Cement Plant at Trident is requesting permission to increase mercury emissions by 89 pounds a year. Already most of our flat water lakes have fish populations too dangerous for pregnant women and children to eat in more than very limited amounts. Allowing fishermen to catch fish, but advising them to restrict or avoid eating them does not bode well for a state promoting tourism as a major industry.

Americans react immediately to disasters such as 9-11, which killed 3,000 people, yet fail to get excited that 1 million of us die



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annually from tobacco, obesity, and alcohol. Former President Ronald Reagan once cited a clever analogy of how we lose our freedoms insidiously (and in the case of mercury, our health). He said that if a frog is tossed into boiling water it will, upon contact, immediately jump out and survive. A frog placed in cold water and brought slowly to boiling, will die before the danger is appreciated.

Before we develop the equivalent of mad hatter's disease, perhaps we should get madder than hell and insist that we take measures that maintain the last best place.



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