

## Resolution 06-02

### ENDORISING THE PRECAUTIONARY PRINCIPLE AS A PUBLIC HEALTH TOOL FOR PREVENTING HARM FROM PERSISTENT BIOACCUMULATIVE TOXIC CHEMICALS (PBTS)

**WHEREAS** every resident of Washington State has an equal right to conditions that protect and promote human health, including a healthy and safe environment, with all children of Washington State having an equal right to conditions that ensure they can reach and maintain their full potential, and

**WHEREAS** Washington State recognizes that “health is a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing, not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” and a fundamental human right<sup>1</sup>; and

**WHEREAS** many conditions, including asthma, cancer, Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, birth defects, behavioral disorders, Autism, and chemical sensitivities, have been linked to environmental toxicants which incur enormous individual and societal costs in Washington State<sup>2, 3</sup> and nationally<sup>4</sup>; and

**WHEREAS** this growing knowledge confers an ethical responsibility and duty to make decisions that promote and maintain human and environmental health, thereby preventing disease, illness or disability<sup>5,6</sup>; and

**WHEREAS** a principle for guiding activities to promote a healthy and safe environment and encourage human health is known as the Precautionary Principle, which consists of four basic elements:

- 1) Taking preventive action in the face of uncertainty,
- 2) Shifting the burden of responsibility of safety to the proponents of an activity;
- 3) Exploring and implementing safer alternatives to possibly harmful actions, and
- 4) Increasing public participation in decision making; and

**WHEREAS** while scientific studies have determined that even low-level exposures to PBTs may cause serious and permanent health and neurodevelopmental harm, it is difficult to directly attribute a particular exposure to a particular illness or injury, emphasizing the need to take action to prevent harm<sup>7</sup>; and

**WHEREAS** the precautionary principle holds that when an activity threatens harm to human health or to the environment, precautionary measures should be taken, even if cause-and- effect relationships are not fully established scientifically<sup>8,9</sup>; and

**WHEREAS** taking precautionary action is the common sense idea behind many adages, such as "be careful", "better safe than sorry" and "look before you leap" and is inherent in the understanding of the Hippocratic oath of "first, do no harm", in essence, the principle goes hand in hand with prevention, the cornerstone of public health; and

**WHEREAS** precautionary action is the basis of many activities designed to protect the health and safety of United States citizens, such as requirements of the federal Food and Drug Administration to ensure that new drugs are efficacious and safe before being placed on the market, requirements of the federal Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970 that require employers to provide safe workplaces and working conditions, and the Food Quality Protection Act of 1996 that acknowledges additional protection for children; and

**WHEREAS** the precautionary principle has been incorporated in international environmental treaties and in health, environment and educational policies of numerous governmental entities in the United States, including the city of San Francisco, and that Seattle includes a statement on the precautionary principle in the City's Comprehensive Plan<sup>10, xiii</sup>; and

**WHEREAS** the precautionary principle is a highly effective decision-making tool for reducing negative and costly effects on human health resulting from exposure to environmental toxicants<sup>11</sup>; and

**WHEREAS** the Washington State Department of Ecology has developed a comprehensive strategy, based on preventing harm to human and environmental health, to reduce and eventually eliminate persistent bioaccumulative toxic chemicals (PBTs), further developing an accompanying PBT Rule which incorporates tenets of prevention<sup>12, 13</sup> and

**WHEREAS** the Washington State Departments of Ecology and Health have developed chemical action plans recommending phase out of mercury<sup>14</sup> and polybrominated diphenyl ethers (PBDEs)<sup>15</sup> in order to protect human and environmental health; and

**WHEREAS** the precautionary principle's preventive foundation promotes environmental and economic justice to protect the environment and to safeguard the health of all people of Washington State; and

**WHEREAS** the precautionary principle has been endorsed by the American Public Health Association, with the APHA stating it "*Reaffirms its explicit endorsement of the precautionary principle as a cornerstone of preventive public health policy and practice*";<sup>16,17,18</sup> and by hundreds of other organizations nationally and internationally, including the American Nurses Association<sup>19</sup>

**THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED THAT** the Washington State Public Health Association (WSPHA) endorses the Precautionary Principle as a policy-making, educational and advocacy tool for preventing harm to health, behavior and neurodevelopment from exposures to PBTs in Washington State; and be it further

**BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED THAT** the WSPHA endorses the precautionary principle as a cornerstone of our preventive approach to public health in Washington State,

advancing the goal that all people have an opportunity to reach and maintain their full potential.

**Signed by: Rick Porso, WSPHA President 2005-2006**

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## **Selected State Organizations Publicly Supporting Phase Out of PBTs**

- Washington State Public Health Association
- Washington State Medical Association
- Washington Academy of Family Physicians
- Washington State Nurses Association
- Washington Physicians for Social Responsibility
- Washington State Association of Occupational Health Nurses

## **Selected Organizations Supporting Precautionary Principle**

- American Public Health Association
- American Nurses Association
- Washington State Nurses Association
- American Commission for Environmental Cooperation
- Physicians for Social Responsibility

- Washington Physicians for Social Responsibility
- City of San Francisco
- Los Angeles Unified School District
- City of Seattle
- Berkeley City Council Resolution
- California EPA
- Portland, Oregon
- Earth Charter

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## References:

- <sup>1</sup> WHO Alma-Ata Declaration (1978).
- <sup>2</sup> Davies, K. *Economic Costs of Diseases and Disabilities Attributable to Environmental Contaminants in Washington State*. <http://washington.chenw.org/pdfs/EnvironmentalCosts.pdf>;
- <sup>3</sup> Davies, K. "How Much Do Environmental Disabilities and Diseases Cost?"; Northwest Public Health; Fall/Winter 2005; [http://www.nwpublichealth.org/docs/nph/f2005/web\\_ex\\_davies\\_f2005.pdf](http://www.nwpublichealth.org/docs/nph/f2005/web_ex_davies_f2005.pdf)
- <sup>4</sup> Landrigan, P. J., Schechter, C. B., Lipton, J. M., Fahs, M. C., and Schwartz, J. (2002). Environmental pollutants and disease in American children: estimates of morbidity, mortality, and costs for lead poisoning, asthma, cancer, and developmental disabilities. *Environ Health Perspect* 110, 721-8.
- <sup>5</sup> Gilbert, S. (2005). Ethical, Legal, and Social Issues: Our Children's Future. *Neurotoxicology* 27.
- <sup>6</sup> Rosenblatt, R. A. (2005). Ecological change and the future of the human species: can physicians make a difference? *Ann Fam Med* 3, 173-6.
- <sup>7</sup> Szpir, Michael. Tracing the Origins of Autism: A Spectrum of New Studies; *Environmental Health Perspectives* Volume 114, Number 7, July 2006. <http://www.ehponline.org/members/2006/114-7/focus.html>
- <sup>8</sup> Tickner, J. A. (2002). Precautionary principle encourages policies that protect human health and the environment in the face of uncertain risks. *Public Health Rep* 117, 493-7.
- <sup>9</sup> Gilbert, S.G. (2005). Public Health and The Precautionary Principle. *Northwest Public Health*, Spring/Summer 2005, 4.
- <sup>10</sup> Environment Element, City of Seattle's Comprehensive Plan, Department of Planning & Development (2005). [http://www.seattle.gov/dpd/Planning/Seattle's\\_Comprehensive\\_Plan/DPD\\_001178.asp](http://www.seattle.gov/dpd/Planning/Seattle's_Comprehensive_Plan/DPD_001178.asp)
- <sup>11</sup> Ashford, N. A. (2004). Implementing the Precautionary Principle: incorporating science, technology, fairness, and accountability in environmental, health, and safety decisions. *Int J Occup Med Environ Health* 17, 59-67.
- <sup>12</sup> Washington State Department of Ecology Proposed Strategy to Continually Reduce Persistent Bioaccumulative Toxins (PBTs) in Washington State, Ecology publication #00-03-054; <http://www.ecy.wa.gov/biblio/0003054.html>;
- <sup>13</sup> Washington State Department of Ecology, PBT Rule Chapter 173-333 WAC; <http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/eap/pbt/rule/>
- <sup>14</sup> Washington State Department of Ecology and Department of Health; Washington's Mercury Chemical Action Plan; <http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/eap/pbt/mercuryplan.html>
- <sup>15</sup> Washington State Department of Ecology and Department of Health; PBDE Chemical Action Plan. <http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/eap/pbt/pbde/>
- <sup>16</sup> Raffensperger, C., Tickner, J., ed. (1999). *Protecting Public Health & the Environment: Implementing the Precautionary Principle*. Island Press, Washington, D.C.
- <sup>17</sup> APHA Policy Statement #9606: The Precautionary Principle and Chemical Exposure Standards for the Workplace. APHA Policy Statements; 1948–present, cumulative. Washington, DC: American Public Health Association. <http://www.apha.org/legislative/policy/policysearch/index.cfm?fuseaction=view&id=124>
- <sup>18</sup> APHA Policy Statement #200011: The Precautionary Principle and Children's health. APHA Policy Statements; 1948–present, cumulative. Washington, DC: American Public Health Association. <http://www.apha.org/legislative/policy/policysearch/index.cfm?fuseaction=view&id=216>

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<sup>19</sup> List of endorsing organizations as well as additional information on the Precautionary Principle is in the Seattle Precautionary Principle White Paper: A Policy Framework for Adopting the Precautionary Principle. The white paper and more updated date information is available at <http://www.asmalldoseof.org/precautionary/index.php>.