Breast-cancer prevention laws needed in Massachusetts
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By Susan Wadia-Ells

The United States has the highest breast cancer rates in the world, and Massachusetts has one of the highest breast cancer rates in the nation. This means that Massachusetts is a pretty but dangerous place to live if you are trying to avoid a breast cancer diagnosis. In fact, one out of eight Massachusetts women can now expect to receive a breast-cancer diagnosis in her lifetime.

New research is finding that many ingredients in cosmetics, body care products, pesticides, hormone-fed meat and dairy, plastics, vehicle and industrial emissions, as well as some pharmaceutical drugs, have known or probable factors that create or support the development of breast cancer in animals and/or in humans. Many studies estimate that at least 90 percent of all breast cancer incidents are non-genetic and thus feasibly preventable.

Just being overweight or sedentary, when you are post-menopausal, can increase your risk of developing breast cancer by up to 20 percent. Our fat cells become a woman's main generators

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of estrogen once she become post-menopausal, with free estrogen the big culprit in most post menopausal breast cancers. Meanwhile, most of these carcinogenic toxins in pesticides, foods, cleaning agents and in air and water pollution, such as parabens and phthalates, are fat-loving substances that turn our excess body fat into toxic storage facilities.

The Environmental Protection Agency, as described in a recent U.S. Supreme Court decision, would prefer not to regulate greenhouse gases because of some residual uncertainty; not much breast cancer protection happening here.

It was therefore a relief last month, when advocates representing a coalition of labor, medical and environmental groups, along with leading researchers from Tufts, UMass Lowell, Boston University, Harvard and MIT, testified on Beacon Hill about the pressing need for a law that would require the state to create a system that phases out the worst toxic chemicals from the environment, when safer alternatives are available.

The European Union, concerned with their own rising breast cancer rates and other environmental health problems, recently passed what some are calling breast cancer prevention laws. One law makes it illegal to sell cosmetics or body care products containing hormone disrupters such as parabens, phthalates and other known or probable carcinogens. The second, known as REACH (Regulation, Evaluation, and Authorization of Chemicals), has similar goals as the proposed Massachusetts safe chemicals legislation.

Opponents of the proposed state law, including the Massachusetts Chemical and Technology Alliance, the American Chemistry Council and The Associated Industries of Massachusetts, were also on Beacon Hill last month. The Medical Device Industry Council and medical device makers testified that their soft plastic blood bags and other medical devices might be banned under this proposed law, since they contain DEHP, a plasticizer within the category of phthalates.

Supporters of the bill, however, say that DEHP products would not be declared illegal under the law, unless or until safer alternatives can be found. Studies show that phthalates from the vinyl can easily leach into fluids with the probability of enhancing the growth of developing cancer cells.

It is ironic and disturbing that the American Cancer Society remains silent about this bill. Supported by hundreds of millions of dollars in annual donations from the chemical and cosmetics industries, and run by a board that strongly represents the interests of the radiation, surgical and pharmaceutical industries, this national cancer educational organization avoids discussing environmental causes of breast cancer.

Massachusetts women face some of the highest breast cancer rates in the world, yet neither the EPA nor the American Cancer Society seems interested in protecting us. In this surreal situation, the very least our state officials can do is pass this thoughtful and life-saving Safer Alternatives Bill.

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