

# Industry linked to study supporting safety of plastics chemical BPA

## 'Same old industry nonsense' blamed for no-risk finding

Posted Apr 29, 2011, 1:15 pm

Susan E. Reed Special to GlobalPost

Four authors of a new report concluding that bisphenol A is safe have ties to companies and groups that benefit from the controversial chemical, which is used to harden everyday plastics found in some food containers, cups and baby bottles.

Two of the researchers – Hermann Schweinfurth and Wolfgang Völkel – reported their affiliations in the report's "declaration of interest." Two others – [Werner Lilienblum](#) and Peter-Jürgen Kramer – have professional websites linking them to the chemical industry.

The report was written by the nine-member Advisory Committee to the German Society for Toxicology, the country's national association of toxicologists.

Schweinfurth acknowledged in his declaration that he works for Bayer Schering Pharma AG, the largest producer of bisphenol A, or BPA, in Europe.

Völkel reported receiving funding from the international industry group BPA Global in the past.

Lilienblum runs a "[consultancy for the industry](#)." And Kramer [describes himself](#) as a "leading toxicologist in the chemical and pharmaceutical industry" who is currently "developing and shaping" toxicology in Germany and throughout Europe.

“It’s just the same old industry nonsense,” said Frederick vom Saal, a University of Missouri endocrinologist who has spent more than a decade researching the health effects of the chemical. “This was organized and funded by Bayer, the largest maker of BPA in Europe. They are simply protecting their product.”

BPA was originally developed as a synthetic form of estrogen but quickly became more valued as an ingredient in the manufacturing of the clear, hard plastic known as polycarbonate. It also is used in the lining of food and beverage cans and has been detected in other food packaging containers, including those labeled "microwave safe."

When heated, or exposed to acidic or caustic substances, BPA is known to leach out of containers into food.

In 2007, the [Milwaukee Journal Sentinel](#) examined nearly 260 scientific studies that looked at the health effects of BPA on laboratory animals with spines. It found 80 percent of the studies showed harm, and the vast majority of those were published by government and academic scientists. The few studies that found the chemical safe were mostly funded by the chemical and plastics industries, or written by scientists with connections or affiliations with those industries.

This new study states the source of study funding is not important and to suggest otherwise is "naive." The report concludes, "The available evidence indicates that BPA exposure represents no noteworthy risk to the health of the human population," and describes the controversy as "journalistic."

Jan Hengstler, the lead author of the review, said his team did not receive funding for the work. He said the committee is made up of elected members of the society, and they represent academia, industry and government "in order to guarantee a broad range of toxicological competence."

The paper appears in the journal [Critical Reviews in Toxicology](#), a peer-reviewed scientific journal.

In 2004, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found BPA in the urine of 93 percent of 2,500 Americans tested. It has been linked to neurological defects, diabetes, breast and prostate cancer and heart disease.

The German study examined more than 5,000 scientific papers conducted on the health effects of BPA. The group's mission, according to the paper, was to "contribute to a balanced and well-founded resolution of the seemingly deadlocked situation" and to offer "an independent judgment."

"After careful consideration, we came to the conclusion that the recent governmental responses of some countries do not have a scientific basis but are politically motivated," Hengstler said.

But other scientists aren't buying it.

The report is "rife with scientific errors and misrepresentations, and it ignores or dismisses some of the best science available to date on BPA's effects," said Pete Myers, CEO and chief scientist of Environmental Health Science, a nonprofit environmental group based in Charlottesville, Va.

Sarah Vogel, a researcher with Johnson Family Foundation who has studied the bisphenol A controversy for several years, said she thought the paper was "odd." However, she was reluctant to call the research industry-influenced.

"I don't think anything is that simple," she said. "They declare in the report that they haven't had any external funding."

Instead, she said it appears to be “more of a reflection of a shared disciplinary background and a shared way of thinking.”

Vogel said she'd like to see a review conducted by scientists without any vested interests.

She said there's a deep rift between the scientific disciplines of toxicology and endocrinology hinging on the theory that some chemicals – including bisphenol A – may behave more like hormones than traditional toxins, and therefore may show health effects at very low concentrations.

Toxicologists don't believe that theory. Endocrinologists do.

In June 2009, the Statistical Assessment Service, or Stats, a group that calls itself an unbiased media watchdog, surveyed members of the Society of Toxicology and found that most U.S. toxicologists don't believe BPA is a toxin, and that they think the media has hyped the issue.

That same summer, the [Endocrine Society](#) released a report citing its concern over the chemical and urged the federal government to ban it from children's products.

The Center for Media and Public Affairs, the parent organization of Stats, [has a history](#) of working for corporations trying to deflect concerns about the safety of their products. In the mid-to-late 1990s, the organization was contracted, at least twice, by the giant tobacco company Philip Morris to monitor media coverage.

In an e-mail from the Tobacco Institute's files at UC, San Francisco, dated Feb. 18, 1999, Philip Morris' vice president, Vic Han, said the company donated money to the center "over the last several years."

The group also is largely funded by ideological groups with a deep anti-regulatory bent, including the Sarah Scaife Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, the Heritage Foundation and the Cato Institute.

Stats has touted this latest BPA review as a "toxic setback for anti-plastic campaigners."

The North American Metal Packaging Alliance, the trade industry for food packagers, agreed.

“It is imperative that public policy be constructed on a foundation of sound science and comprehensive toxicological assessments, rather than on the basis of fear,” wrote John Rost, chairman of the industry group, in a statement. “These authors, who have no interest in the issue other than seeing that the science is objectively evaluated, now reaffirm what regulatory experts across the globe have stated consistently – BPA poses no risk to human health, including infants and children.”

With all the public rancor over the chemical, BPA has made its way into both national and international political consciousness.

In March of this year, Chinese health officials recommended banning the chemical from products made for children and infants. Canada banned it last year and the German Environmental Agency recommended manufacturers find alternatives to bisphenol A in their products.

A bill that would ban the use of BPA in bottles, cans and food packaging products was approved Tuesday in the state Legislature's Environmental Safety and Toxic Metals Committee.

Yet others have deemed the chemical safe, including the European Union's Food Safety Authority. However, in November the European Commission, the executive branch of the European Union, issued a ban on the chemical in baby bottles.

In November, the World Health Organization released a report suggesting that the research so far is not strong enough to indict BPA. However, there are enough indications, it said, to warrant more work.

Both the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences are actively investigating the chemical, and will release their findings in the next few years.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has called BPA a "chemical of concern."