Recommended Reading
ACSH staffers were pleased to read two reports from thinktanks addressing the panic fomented by activist groups concerning trace levels of chemicals in our consumer products and our bodies.

Dr. Angela Logomasini of the Competitive Enterprise Institute wrote a comprehensive report on bisphenol-A (BPA) that was published by the Cascade Policy Institute [1]. “Despite considerable fears raised by activist groups and the press,” she writes, “the science does not warrant regulations on BPA. Instead, it shows that human exposure is too low to have any measurable impact.”

“She also talks about omnipresence of BPA,” says ACSH's Dr. Elizabeth Whelan, “including its many functions in all kinds of products and how it cannot be easily replaced.”

Dr. Seymour Garte takes on the “Chemophobia Conundrum” [2] in the American Enterprise Institute's magazine, The American. According to Dr. Garte, “the false idea that our bodies have become 'toxic waste dumps,' as has become one of the latest mantras of the environmental doomers, is not only silly but counterproductive. We cannot ban chemicals from our world, so the false crisis has no real solution.”

“Both of these essays point out the myriad flaws and fallacies used by so-called ‘environmentalists' in attacking chemicals in our environment just because they can be detected,” says ACSH's Dr. Gilbert Ross.

Unscaring Not as Easy as Scaring
A Wall Street Journal article about The Lancet's retraction of Dr. Wakefield's spurious 1998 paper linking vaccines to autism [3] quotes ACSH Advisor and chief of infectious diseases at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia Dr. Paul Offit, who said, “This retraction by The Lancet came far too late. It's very easy to scare people; it's very hard to unscare them.”

“That was our reaction as well,” says Dr. Whelan. “We're bothered by media coverage given to this retraction. They act as if this article was printed last week. The misleading and unscientific article in question was published twelve years ago, and The Lancet never apologized for it. They didn't even retract it of their own volition; they waited until the General Medical Council condemned it. And despite the fact that it was retracted, we have a quote in the Wall Street Journal from the president of the National Autism Association saying it's still possible that the MMR vaccine causes autism.”

“Even now, Lancet editor Richard Horton fails to accept responsibility for the human toll he allowed by publishing the Wakefield 'study' in 1998,” says Dr. Ross. “The study -- even without the then-unknown ethical failings -- was a terribly unscientific piece of garbage, based on twelve children
and using a 'novel' theory of causation and flimsy 'evidence.' Even when ten of the original thirteen authors withdrew their names, Horton declined to either withdraw the article or accept his own guilt for the ravages of preventable childhood diseases following the havoc he allowed to occur.

“Ironically, the anti-vaccine hysteria against MMR vaccine spurred by Wakefield and The Lancet morphed into anti-thimerosal hysteria. Thimerosal is a mercury-containing preservative, now banished from vaccines due to this baseless fear. Yet, MMR never contained thimerosal -- the scapegoat in these superstitious attacks seems to vary depending which side of the ocean you're on.”

“The overarching lesson here is critical,” says ACSH’s Jeff Stier. “When a widely respected medical journal publishes a scare story, the scare still may be unfounded. It may take years for the record to be corrected, and the consequences of the precautionary principle could be deadly.”

**Citizens Council: Harm Reduction Is Jolly Good**

According to the UK’s National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE), “The Citizens Council, a group which brings the views of the public to NICE’s decision-making, has voted overwhelmingly in favour of the use of harm reduction as a way to reduce the dangers of smoking...The findings from the Citizens Council come as the Department of Health launches a Tobacco Control Strategy for England which aims to halve the number of smokers, from 21 to 10% of the population by 2020.”

“The Citizens Council, in its advisory capacity to NICE, perceives smokeless tobacco as part of an overall approach to help people stop smoking cigarettes,” says Dr. Whelan. “This is an historic first for public health. We applaud them for this, and we think the U.S. FDA should follow the UK’s lead.” [UPDATE: NICE external communications manager Tonya Gillis e-mails to clarify that NICE favors harm reduction -- but not via the use of smokeless tobacco. We look forward to seeing what other successful harm reduction methods NICE devises. --Editor]

Dr. Ross agrees: “This is another step towards science-based help with quitting for addicted smokers. I wish some government panel in the U.S. would come out with a similar opinion.”

**At Least Do the Right Experiment**

Dr. Michael Alderman makes several compelling arguments about the assault on salt in the Commentary section of the current issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA).

“He points out that there’re several fallacies in the universal sodium reduction approach,” says Dr. Ross. “For example, he notes that even if reducing sodium were effective to reduce rates of hypertension, it wouldn't mean it will reduce population-wide cardiovascular disease, and there are sub-populations where sodium reduction could even be harmful. He specifically suggests that we do controlled, randomized trials on large populations to determine if reduction of sodium intake has any benefit to public health.”

“Another way of saying this is, by trying to universally reduce sodium the way that New York City has proposed, you're basically doing an uncontrolled experiment to see if there is any benefit,” says Dr. Whelan. “If we're going to do an experiment, we should do the right kind that would actually give us information. We have to compliment JAMA for publishing this. It's certainly politically incorrect to stand up for science in the salt debate right now.”
Curtis Porter is a research intern at the American Council on Science and Health (ACSH.org).