How many experts does it take...?

By ACSH Staff — November 3, 2011

Members of the American Public Health Association (APHA) convened this week in Washington, DC for their annual meeting and, while we’re not entirely sure what went on there, more than a few questionable policy decisions seem to be the result.

Particularly high on the APHA’s list is a call for local, state, and federal governments to phase out [1] the use of a plastic called polyvinyl chloride (PVC) in building materials and other products used in facilities like schools and hospitals. The association’s claim is that certain components of PVC, such as phthalates, which make PVC soft and flexible, pose health risks to those who work or reside in these facilities.

We have been down this road before, beginning with our ‘Blue-Ribbon Panel’ [2] report on two commonly used phthalates: DEHP in medical devices, and DINP in toys like rubber ducks, said ACSH’s Dr. Gilbert Ross. Our multi-specialty panel, chaired by former Surgeon General Dr. C. Everett Koop, after months of research, published a report in 1999 showing that those phthalates pose no health threat to anyone. Despite another decade of activist agitation, nothing to contradict that evaluation has been reliably discovered, other than toxic effects on rodents exposed to very high doses of these plasticizers. But the paranoia against phthalates continues, here and in the EU. This latest attack by the APHA will only add to the hype, I’m afraid based on no valid science.

Also on the agenda of the association is a recommendation for a radical decrease [3] in the sodium intake of all Americans. APHA directly ties the high prevalence of hypertension to the country’s sodium intake, and urges the FDA to drastically lower the standard daily value for sodium in processed foods, from 2,400 mg to 1,500 mg. The association’s ultimate aim is for food manufacturers and restaurants to reduce the sodium content of their products by 75 percent within the next 10 years.

However, as we reported earlier this fall, scientists are still debating [4] whether a low-sodium diet actually benefits most people. Dr. Ross acknowledges that, while some people with high blood pressure may respond positively to a low-salt diet, many will not. The effects on the population at large are therefore unpredictable. To advise such a drastic reduction in sodium for the general population is irresponsible, he says. Some people will actually be harmed by a diet that is so low in sodium.