September 29, 2010 Newsday

By KAREN JOY MILLER

Karen Joy Miller is president of the Huntington Breast Cancer Action Coalition , Prevention Is The Cure.

Ever wonder what's in the cleaners you use in your home?

Most household cleaner manufacturers keep the chemicals in their products a secret, so if you've ever searched for an ingredient list, you're likely to come up empty-handed.

But that's changing. New York State Department of Environmental Conservation Commissioner Pete Grannis sent letters to environmental, public health and consumer advocates earlier this month, announcing that DEC would begin requiring household-cleaner manufacturing giants to reveal the chemical ingredients in their products and any health risks they pose, as is required by decades-old but widely ignored regulations.

It's the first time New York - or, to my knowledge, any state - has made such a request. And given what we are learning about the links between cancer and the chemicals commonly found in household cleaners, New York's leadership comes not a moment too soon.

A recent case-controlled study conducted at Silent Spring Institute, a scientific research institute focused on environmental issues and women's health, suggests that these cleaning chemicals play a role in breast cancer by mimicking hormones that signal tumor growth or altering mammary gland development early in life. The study was the first of its kind, and certainly further research is warranted.

In the meantime, testing by organizations like the Environmental Working Group, a nonprofit public health and environmental research and advocacy organization, has identified other potential risks. Testing the air emissions from 21 cleaning products, the organization found a total of 457 air contaminants - including benzene and formaldehyde (classified respectively by the Environmental Protection Agency as known and probable human carcinogens).

Federal legislation in the form of the Household Product Labeling Act would require companies to list all ingredients on products' labeling or packaging, so we can make informed decisions for ourselves and the most vulnerable in our family: the elderly, children, pregnant women and those with health conditions. Without chemical disclosure and product labeling, it's impossible for parents to tell the difference between risky and safe cleaners.

Research seems to indicate that diseases like breast cancer are not caused by genes alone; exposure to toxic substances can contribute to their onset. Since we have some control over our exposure to toxins, why wouldn't we want parents to have the option of making the safest choices about what they use to wipe down the countertops or clean their infant's high chair?

New York State is in a unique position to start making that nontoxic vision a reality. Since the 1970s, the state has had regulations on the books requiring companies to file semiannual reports listing the ingredients contained in their products and describing any company research on these chemicals' health and environmental effects. But this pioneering law went unnoticed and unenforced until an attorney at the nonprofit environmental law firm Earthjustice found and brought it to the attention of state officials in 2008.

Now the state is poised to begin enforcing the law. That's an important first step bringing us one step closer to the peace of mind that comes from a clean and healthy home.

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