AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS

PRESIDENT’S MESSAGE

THE FEDERAL HAZARDOUS SUBSTANCES LABELING ACT

About 10 years ago when the Committee on Accident Prevention was created, the Academy focused national attention on accidents as the No. 1 cause of death in childhood and a major contributor to disability, disfigurement and crippling. One of the most spectacular features of this Committee’s program is its efforts to prevent and treat poisoning in children, as demonstrated by the amazing growth of poison control centers. Through these community facilities, valuable data on the occurrence and frequency of childhood poisoning have been brought to light. This information has documented an impression held for a long time by many pediatricians: namely, that the creativeness of modern chemistry is both a boon and a bane, the latter all too often in the case of toddlers from about 1 to 4 years of age. Legislation has always been one of the most important means of accident prevention, including accidental poisoning. For example, an early and very effective law aimed at reducing lye burns and deaths from corrosive poisoning in children was the Federal Caustic Poisons Act of 1927, which was developed with the support of organized medicine, under the able leadership of Chevalier Jackson, Sr.

But as new products and new hazards increased, new legislation was required for greater protection. The Federal Hazardous Substances Labeling Act of July 1960 grew out of the concerted efforts of organized medicine and the industries concerned. This law now adds a new dimension to health protection from a wide variety of hazardous products found in or about the home, in addition to the 12 substances formerly labeled “Poison” under the old Caustic Poisons Act.

Hazardous products include those that are flammable, toxic by ingestion, inhalation or absorption, explosive, caustic, irritant or strong sensitizers. Because parents often are not aware of the danger of such products, the articles are readily available to young children for unsafe investigation. Jensen and Wilson reported, in a study of 100 cases of poisonings in children, that “in 53 cases the poison was not in its usual place, either because it was in use, because persons other than the parents had left it out, or because the parents themselves were careless.”

Recent mortality data reveal that there are at least 1,400 deaths at all ages from solid and liquid substances, with about 450 deaths in children under 5 years. Last year 35,000 cases of accidental poisoning were reported to the National Clearinghouse from 182 centers in 37 States. The National Health Survey has estimated that 822,000 ingestions of toxic substances occur each year.

Both the householder and physician will benefit from the requirements of this new law. Information to prevent accidents from household products and to offer appropriate first aid when accidents occur must now be readily available to users and physicians. The hazardous substance must be revealed, together with such precautionary warnings and measures as are necessary for safe use and handling of such products.

The Act defines a “hazardous substance” as one that is toxic or highly toxic, corrosive, an irritant, flammable or extremely flammable, one that generates pressure through heat, decomposition or other means, or one that has been designated by the Secretary of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare as a “strong sensitizer” or a radioactive material subject to the Act and may cause “substantial personal injury or substantial illness during or as a proximate result of any reasonably foreseeable handling or use, including reasonably foreseeable ingestion by children.”

The Act requires conspicuous display of such basic information as the name and place of business of the manufacturer, packer, distributor or seller; the common or usual name or the chemical name (if there is no common or usual name) of the hazardous substance, or of each component that contributes specifically to the hazard. The signal word Danger must appear on substances that are extremely flammable, corrosive or highly toxic. The signal word Warning or Caution is required on all other hazardous substances. An affirmative statement of the principal hazard or hazards, such as

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Flammable, Vapor Harmful, Causes Burns, Absorbed through the Skin, or similar wording is needed to describe the hazard, together with precautionary measures to indicate the action to be followed or avoided, and instruction when necessary or appropriate for first-aid treatment. The Act requires that the word Poison appear on any highly toxic substance, and in the pending regulations the use of the skull and crossbones will be required, together with the word “Poison,” on highly toxic and corrosive substances, in keeping with the related requirement of the Caustic Poisons Act. Instructions for handling and storage of packages that require special care will be displayed. The important statement, Keep Out of the Reach of Children, or its practical equivalent, must appear on the label of all hazardous substances.

Several states and local governments have already enacted laws dealing with the labeling of hazardous substances. The pediatrician and all who care for children can make significant contributions to the health of the public through dissemination and use of the information provided in these new laws and through cooperation with the responsible agencies.

In addition, it is necessary to remember that as “good” as a law may be, it is the way people use, handle and store a product that determines whether a poisoning occurs. While the new Labeling Act will provide warnings to those who can and do read the label and will certainly provide the pediatrician with more useful information in an emergency, the principal way to prevent accidental poisoning in children continues to be education of those who supervise children.

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References
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