

## **The pharma pollution challenge: Health Canada looking to control growing problem**

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Rachel Carson stunned the world in 1962 with *Silent Spring*, her book about DDT. Developed just before the Second World War, the pesticide was used against mosquitoes before U.S troops landed on Pacific islands and for delousing Europe.

After DDT became generally available, Carson, a former U.S government marine biologist, meticulously described its pervasion of the food chain. Industry was outraged but scientists rallied around her, and when President John F Kennedy's science committee vindicated her. DDT was banned.

Carson was a bellwether for modern environmental activism and Wendy Mesley, a breast cancer survivor and co-host of CBC's *Marketplace* has added her voice, using a recent program to challenge assertions that only a small percentage of cancers are environmental.

"I had my blood tested; I'm full of carcinogens," Mesley said. "I don't think my blood tests will uncover the reason that I got cancer...but I have been accumulating toxins probably since I was born; maybe even before."

Her concerns are leant credibility by a study prepared for the Canadian Institute for Environmental Law and Policy (CIELAP) by Susan Holtz, founding vice-chairwoman of the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy.

Accessible at [www.cielap.org](http://www.cielap.org) the study says widespread contamination from trashed or flushed pharmaceuticals and personal care products, the use of which has ballooned in the past decade, has been confirmed in many countries.

U.S. data on more than 150 compounds since 1999 indicate the problem is widespread. "In one sampling program of source water in 25 ground water and 49 surface water supplies, at least one of the 124 chemicals tested for was founded in 96%," Holtz said.

Many pharmaceuticals are removed during wastewater treatment or even earlier by natural processes, but some persist. A 2003 study of tap water in 10 Canadian cities found low concentrations in four samples. A more recent study of 22 Ontario water treatment plants found low levels of eight different drugs.

"Some of the suggestive evidence...is the change in the incidence of disease and abnormalities related to the endocrine system," Holtz said, noting a "recent rise in the incidence of breast, testicular and prostate cancers at a time when overall cancer rates are declining."

CIELP noted, "More contaminants will eventually find their way into our environment." Sharing their concern, Health Canada co-sponsored international scientific workshops in 2002 and 2004. Now an options analysis is about to be published setting the stage for consultations about regulations, and the department says it is "committed to moving forward."

*Ken Pole is an Ottawa journalist.*