

January 8, 2008

The Honorable Edward M. Kennedy
Chair
Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and
Pensions
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable George Miller
Chair
Committee on Education and Labor
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Michael B. Enzi
Ranking Member
Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and
Pensions
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Howard McKeon
Ranking Member
Committee on Education and Labor
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairmen and Ranking Members:

Professionals working on the frontlines of the health care industry in the United States are exposed to an array of toxic chemicals and drugs on a daily basis. Nurses have reported increased health problems that may be linked to the diverse, chronic workplace exposures they face. However, their exposures and risks have never been thoroughly studied, and federal workplace safety standards exist for just six of the literally hundreds of hazardous substances to which nurses are exposed on the job.¹ This is unacceptable. We are writing today to urge you to call on the Bush administration to stop its almost seven years of foot dragging and move forward on implementing the critical national workplace exposures study.

According to a recent survey of 1,500 nurses from all 50 states by Environmental Working Group and Health Care Without Harm, in collaboration with the American Nurses Association and the Environmental Health Education Center of the University of Maryland's School of Nursing, nurses who were exposed frequently to sterilizing chemicals, cleaners, drug preparation residues, radiation, and other hazardous substances reported increased rates of asthma, miscarriage, and certain types of cancer. When exposed to some of these hazards during pregnancy nurses reported increased rates of cancer and birth defects in their children. Although the survey was not a scientifically controlled sample, the findings are remarkably consistent with laboratory and occupational studies of the hazardous agents that were investigated. The findings are troubling and indicate that further, comprehensive research of occupational hazards faced by our health professionals is urgently needed.

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) – the federal agency responsible for conducting research and making recommendations for the prevention of work-related injury and illness – laid out plans in 2001 to conduct a study on occupational hazards and employee health and safety practices across all industries, starting with the Health

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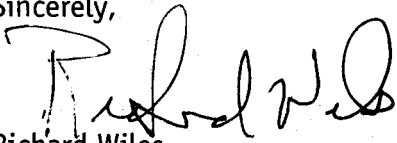
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EWG letter to U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions
and U.S. House Committee on Education and Labor

Services industry. However, the study has been unnecessarily delayed by bureaucratic delays in the funding process. Last month a three-year funding plan was approved from NIOSH's National Occupational Research Agenda program, but final sign off by the Office of Management and Budget could delay the study for yet another year. This foot-dragging is unacceptable.

Another year must not pass without action as our dedicated healthcare professionals continue to be exposed to dangerous substances, increasing their risks for developing serious health problems. We request your urgent attention as the Chairmen and Ranking Members of the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee and House Education and Labor Committee, and urge you both to ensure that the National Exposures at Work Survey is not delayed any longer by the administration.

Sincerely,



Richard Wiles
Executive Director

Cc: United States Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions
United States House of Representatives Committee on Education and Labor

ⁱ Environmental Working Group, Healthcare Without Harm, American Nurses Association, University of Maryland's School of Nursing Environmental Health Education Center. 2007. Nurses' Health: A Survey on Health & Chemical Exposures. Available online at: http://www.ewg.org/sites/nurse_survey/analysis/summary.php