



## PRESS RELEASE

### Harvard study of newborns prompts demands for EU restrictions

**Brussels (8 June 2005)** - The European Public Health Alliance Environment Network and Health Care with Harm are calling for immediate action following new findings that neonates in intensive care units are being exposed to much higher levels of a toxic chemical than the general public.

The move has been prompted by an alert from Health Care Without Harm, an international coalition of 435 health and environmental groups in 53 countries, following the worrying findings from the US published today in *Environmental Health Perspectives* (see website address below).

The study shows high levels of metabolites of di-2-ethylhexyl phthalate (DEHP) in the urine of babies in intensive care units. The levels in these highly-vulnerable infants can be as much as 50 times higher than those recorded for the wider US population by national registries. This represents a major concern because DEHP has been shown in animal laboratory studies to be a potent reproductive toxin that damages the male reproductive system.

DEHP is used to soften the vinyl (PVC) plastic in medical devices, such as the tubing and bags that contain intravenous fluids. The problem comes when DEHP oozes from the plastic walls into the solutions fed to tiny babies in intensive care.

Health Care Without Harm Executive Director of the European office, Dr. Cestmir Hrdinka says: "We urge European authorities to act on the mounting evidence of heavy DEHP exposure to neonates. It is just wrong for EU to allow sick infants to be heavily dosed with DEHP, even as it is protecting others from phthalate exposure by banning the chemicals in toys and cosmetics." The use of phthalates in cosmetics and toys for small children is already banned within the European Union.

The call for action is supported by the European Public Health Alliance Environment Network, an international non-governmental organisation representing health and environmental networks and groups working at the European level. "We want to see an EU-wide restriction on the use of DEHP in the PVC used to produce neonatal intravenous tubing and feeding bags," says Génon Jensen, Director of the European Public Health Alliance Environment Network (EEN).

So far, the European Parliament has urged national governments to restrict the use of DEHP in medical devices for vulnerable groups, except where such a restriction would have a negative impact on medical treatment. Earlier this year, the EU Risk Reduction Strategy recommended that hospitals limit DEHP exposure from medical devices for neonates and other high-risk patient groups. However, neither of these latter moves are binding.

Avoiding the use of DEHP-containing medical devices helps reduce exposure. The Harvard study measured levels in a Boston hospital where non-DEHP containing medical devices were used in some neonatal treatments. The exposure levels among babies in neonatal intensive care were used were found to be much lower.

A small number of concerned hospitals in Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Austria and the Netherlands have switched to products containing a DEHP substitute. However, many health professionals do not know whether or not they are using products containing DEHP because information is not always included on the label. Industry may be reluctant to make changes to labelling and material content because of cost considerations. "A legally-binding directive will enable health professionals to switch more quickly to safer, high performing substitutes," EEN Director, Génon Jensen says.

The Harvard study is available on the Environmental Health Perspectives website at: <http://ehp.niehs.nih.gov/members/2005/7932/7932.pdf>

For more about health concerns of DEHP and PVC: <http://www.noharm.org/pvcDehp/issue>

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**European Public Health Alliance - Environment Network** is an international non-governmental organizations advocating environmental protection as a means to improving health and well-being.

**Health Care Without Harm** is an international coalition of 435 organizations in 53 countries working to transform the health care industry so it is no longer a source of harm to people and the environment.