

the dilemma posed to physicians when their patients are suffering and they are prevented from knowing the chemicals to which their patients have been exposed.

Labor organizations need specific hazardous chemical information to conduct onsite safety training.

Emergency planners require specific information to prevent tragedies from happening and to respond immediately if a tragedy should arise. It is unthinkable that they would be kept out of the know.

This lack of information becomes especially vital when dealing with community disasters. For example, in the wake of the Bhopal/Union Carbide chemical disaster, physicians in India did not have the technical information needed to effectively treat their patients.

Emergency planners also need information on hazards existing in other communities as well as in all facilities operated by corporations operating local plants.

The need to have access to national information is the vital link in the right-to-know law and is critical in any

debate about the suppression of federal government databases. There are many reasons why citizens require such access:

- To learn about hazards in other jurisdictions where relatives live or children attend school.
- To verify information by comparing data submitted elsewhere.
- To link other national environmental, worker safety, and public health databases.
- To analyze trends by geographic area, chemical, company, or industry.
- To learn about safety improvements at similar facilities in other communities.

Researchers need complete national information to learn, for example, whether certain hazardous industries are associated with higher or lower unemployment, income levels, property values, and minority populations. The latter point is especially crucial in tracking environmental justice issues.

At this critical juncture in our nation's history, we must remember that the lack of hazardous information in the Bhopal tragedy, which resulted in so many deaths and impairments, was the very impetus for the passage of right-to-know laws in this country. The withholding of such information could actually result in a similar calamity here in the United States.

Finally, it is ironic that at a time when the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe is celebrating their recently signed Aarhus Convention on environmental information (which, in itself, is a remarkable development in international law), in the United States, a nation whose right-to-know laws served as a model for such international agreements, we are experiencing a severe retrenchment of our rights.

For more information, visit the websites of the Right-to-Know Network ([www.rtk.net](http://www.rtk.net)) and OMBWatch ([www.ombwatch.org](http://www.ombwatch.org)).

# Environmental Data Suppression in Lansing: Why Did They Do it?

By Brian McKenna

**T**he Ingham County Health Department spent two years and \$250,000 investigating the county's environmental health. The result? One glossy, 20-page brochure that largely sang the praises of the county's water quality. At about \$12,500 a page, that's pretty expensive research.

In fact, as many readers know by now, the county suppressed about 300 pages of reports that detailed myriad of pollution problems in the greater Lansing area. Thankfully, this fall, a Washington-based activist group named PEER, Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, came to the rescue, publishing suppressed

reports on water, food quality and air, finally making the information available to Michigan citizens.

County health officials deny that any suppression took place. What else could they say?

What would Jim Carrey say? Carrey was a compulsive truth-speaker in the  
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Hollywood film “Liar, Liar.” If Carey’s straight-shooting character was an administrator for the Ingham County Health Department, he might respond with the 15 points below.

The question again, “Why did you suppress all of that important environmental data?”

### 1. *Governments Are Neurotic.*

All governments are torn between the contradictory roles of supporting economic development and serving the public at large. The economy takes priority. The county probably had anxiety about offending local corporations, even though industry tends to treat the environment as its own “tap and sink.” Ergo the fact that General Motors had the worst leaking underground storage tank in Lansing — an “immediate threat to health, safety or the environment” according to the MDEQ — was not important enough to mention in the official report.

2. *Fear about offending Governor Engler’s Department of Environmental Quality.* The Health Department is beholden to the Engler administration for some financial support. It therefore has an interest in keeping state officials happy. The official report omitted the fact that state government “delisted” (refused to enforce clean-up of) a Holt contamination site where, in 1953, a fuel oil truck operator mistakenly pumped 900 gallons of heating oil down an abandoned well.

3. *Concern about offending Ingham County Commissioners who desire to get re-elected.* A rural county commissioner might not be comfortable with the suppressed report’s detailed discussion of atrazine, the #1 restricted-use herbicide in Ingham County in 1997. Due to its carcinogenic nature, atrazine is banned throughout much of Europe.

4. *Not doing its job?* Newly uncovered data revealed that the Health Department was not doing a sufficient job of environmental enforcement. Thus the following statement by the county’s environmental health director about a potential gasoline pipeline spill was censored: “Given the old pipes, the amount of pipes in Ingham County, and the statistics on spills, [a gasoline pipeline spill is] fairly likely.”

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## The Health Department wasn’t doing a sufficient enforcement job.

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5. *Being secretive is better all around.* Public Health officials want to keep contamination violations to themselves so that they can enjoy negotiating leverage with offenders like local restaurants. The meta-message to the polluter: clean up your operation or we’ll publicize your infractions in the press.

6. *Government is obsessed with hierarchy, leaving little room for democracy.* Here’s what Karl Marx had to say about the “bureaucratic essence” of government. “With the best will in the world, the keenest humanitarianism and the strongest intelligence, the administrative authorities are unable to do more than resolve temporary and transitory conflicts. . . . The essential relationship is the bureaucratic relationship, inside the administrative body as well as in its connection with the body administered. . . . The state exists as

various bureau-mentalities connected by relations of subordination and passive obedience where the chief abuse becomes hierarchy.”

7. *Public Health institutions have betrayed our trust.* The traditional task of government, under corporate rule, is to reassure the public, not to rock the boat and agitate the power structure. Government is about administrating, not muckraking. According to Laurie Garrett, author of the New York Times bestseller, *Betrayal of Trust: The Collapse of Global Public Health* (New York: Hyperion, 2000), public health has become the stepchild of huge medical systems that exhaust the budget in providing individualized care while ignoring the fundamental problems of disease anticipation and control.

8. *Government has a very conservative notion of scientific proof.* It is a chief purveyor of positivism: the belief that knowledge is largely limited to whatever is measurable, quantifiable, and reproducible — in a word, positive. And yet positivism is just one of many modes of inquiry, often one of the weaker ones. Positivism abhors historical, contextual and critical knowledge that digs deeper to reveal the essences behind the appearances. Moreover, as social activist Hal Draper made clear, “the state arrogantly demands that the people put ‘unlimited trust in the officialdom’ while the state itself holds ‘unlimited distrust of all nonofficials.’ The domain of governmental authority is that it presents itself as the one and only ‘official reality.’”

9. *Attributing specific health outcomes to the environment would undermine the entire medical-industrial complex.* Doing environmental health research is a very radical proposition. If a significant portion of local diseases — cancer, heart disease, asthma — could be

attributed to specific environmental toxins at given sites, then the social order might be turned upside down as massive monies shifted to the victims of toxins (via litigation, legislation or other methods). That's why BIO-medicine is the dominant form of medicine. It focuses on BIO-logical pathology diagnosed after the fact and pretty much ignores social, psychological and environmental etiologies to illness and disease. And if the social and psychological factors are recognized, they are seldom reimbursable.

**10. *Government wants to control the message, not democratize it.*** As Michigan's infamous PBB scandal of the 1970s demonstrates, government officials are primarily concerned with preventing hysteria, controlling information, and containing debate in the midst of grassroots community action. Government often turns to "hard sciences" like toxicology for support. But scientists are usually ill-equipped to arbitrate on questions of public policy. Many of the issues that arise in science, such as the biological effects of low-level radiation, cannot be answered by science, and so are "trans-scientific," requiring the input of all citizens.

**11. *Local government officials were shocked at the findings.*** They were likely in denial about the true extent of environmental problems in Ingham County. It was far easier to kill the messenger than face up to the facts.

**12. *Government bureaucrats are not journalists.*** That is, they are not set up to communicate potential dangers to the citizenry in a rapid manner. When a county water specialist published a study in the *Journal of Environmental Health* (December 1999; Vol. 62, no. 5) about the dangers of boron in the well water of certain Ingham County citizens, the health department never

bothered to communicate this potential danger to those citizens.

**13. *Governments are loathe to support the Precautionary Principle.*** Bureaucrats usually feel that "potential" dangers are not the same as "proven" dangers. Besides, talking about what-might-happen would upset too many people unnecessarily.

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## Governments have too many conflicting interests to tell the straight story.

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**14. *Government shudders at historical perspectives to environmental problems.*** As historian William Appleman Williams notes, "In truth, the environmental issue defines and dramatizes the need for a radical social consciousness in a total fashion." One cannot talk about the environment without examining political, economic, historic, ideological and cultural components. For an excellent discussion of this truth, read James O'Connor's "Natural Causes" (New York: Guilford, 1997).

**15. *Holistic perspectives are loathed by our dominant institutions.*** Our government is dominated by a regulatory approach, focusing on one chemical, one exposure or one type of intervention. This prevents local public health officials from stepping back to take a look at the big picture. Holism requires that we ask how all the

broken pieces of Humpty Dumpty fit together — politics, economics, old secrets. But all the King's horse and all the King's men can't put Humpty together again, as the rhyme goes. Governments can crack eggs but cannot fix them because they are major players in environmental politics. When good studies are produced, governments often suppress them. Governments have too many conflicting interests to tell the straight story. It takes enlightened citizens to do the job of researching the local environment in an honest and thorough manner.

### Epilogue

These 15 arguments do not mean that we cannot get honest and good data from governmental sources. We most certainly can. See, for example, the General Accounting Office's excellent reports, the Michigan Department of Community Health's web page or the U.S. Census data. Several parts of the reality puzzle exist within the government's information warehouses and within the reports of covert insiders and whistleblowers who release data to organizations like PEER.

We need to create citizens who are trained to gather and critically interpret the data that government officials have locked up in their filing cabinets, disc drives or heads. Environmentalists throughout Michigan should conduct their own local environmental health assessments. In this way, "community participation" can take the form of direct action. Outraged citizens need to enact an uncompromising stance — going beyond the governmental regulators who presume to represent them — by directly challenging capital's exclusive prerogative to make decisions that threaten the community's health.

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