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NURSE IN A HARD HAT TAKES ON TOXIC CHEMICALS

BY WENDA REED / PHOTOS BY INGRID PAPE SHELDON

We are sitting in Karen Bowman's compact Greenwood home sipping organic green tea out of ceramic cups. There are hardwood floors and lots of green houseplants; the door is open to let in the fresh air. As an occupational and environmental health nurse intimately concerned about what goes into her body, Bowman has chosen to be a vegetarian who eats some fish. She doesn't use pesticides in her house and garden. She doesn't use plastics to cook, store or serve food or drinks.

Her eyes still flash with anger when she recalls receiving the results of her "Pollution in People" profile five years ago. The local Toxic-Free Legacy Coalition tested the hair, blood and urine of 10 Washingtonians to determine how many everyday chemicals showed up in their bodies. Bowman had 35 toxic chemicals in hers, including flame retardants, mercury, lead, arsenic, DDT and the highest level of phthalates — chemicals added to plastics to increase their flexibility and durability — in the study. These various chemicals have been linked to learning deficits, cancer, organ damage and harm to the reproductive and nervous systems.

"It was very startling," she says. "At first I was very angry. It felt like a toxic trespass on my body."

Bowman figures that some of the exposure stems from her job as a "nurse in a hard hat," visiting bricklaying job sites, foundries and other industrial workplaces as an occupational health nurse. Other parts may have come from earlier experiences as a nurse's aid, medical assistant and public health nurse working with IV bags and tubing which contain a lot of phthalates.

"I went through the stages of grief in a way," she remembers. "Anger, bargaining, blaming, denying. I tried to get all the chemicals out of my house.

But you can't. You just can't."

In the end, she redoubled her efforts, begun a few years earlier, to become an environmental activist.

"I really wasn't the environmentalist I am now," she says of her first 30 years in the medical field. "I wasn't politically involved; I didn't talk to my legislators at all."

While she was finishing her master's degree in nursing at the University of Washington in 2004, she attended a cocktail party with professors of psychosocial and community health from the UW School of Nursing and local and national advocates for environmental health. Her eyes were opened to all of the possibilities for change.

That year, the Washington State Nurses Association received a grant to create an environmental health specialist position, a job Bowman took and still holds. From that platform, she serves with a dozen local, national and international coalitions and the Washington State Departments of Ecology and Health to bring about legislative and regulatory change to reduce toxic chemicals. She also works to inspire other nurses and health care providers to join the effort. The self-described "nonpublic speaker" teaches classes, gives workshops and sometimes speaks to hundreds of people



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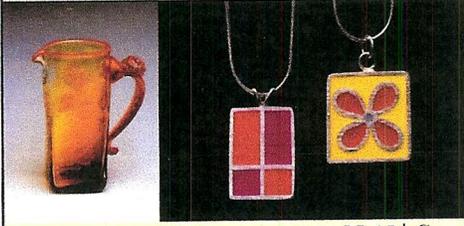
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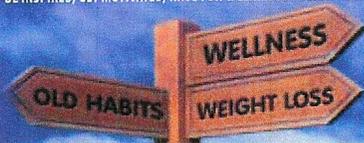


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KAREN BOWMAN USES AN X-RAY FLUORESCENCE ANALYZER GUN TO TEST CHILDREN'S TOYS FOR LEAD, ARSENIC, CADMIUM AND OTHER HEAVY METALS.

at the annual Nurse Legislative Day in Olympia. She also teaches nursing part-time at the University of Washington's Bothell campus.

The Washington Toxics Coalition, a close ally, terms her "a nurse on a mission."

NURSING IN HER BLOOD

Bowman was born at Fort Lawton in Seattle and grew up in the Greenwood neighborhood and Normandy Park, graduating from Mt. Rainier High School in Des Moines. "I was always bandaging birds and dogs and Grandpa," she says. "My grandmother was a surgical scrub nurse; I never thought about doing anything else."

She was a candy-striper volunteer at Virginia Mason Hospital when she was 12 and loved it. After high school, she worked as a nursing assistant at

a nursing home, then as a medical assistant for 10 years before earning her associate degree in nursing from Shoreline Community College in 1986. She worked in a hospital setting for three years, then began a 13-year career with Virginia Mason's Occupational Medicine division in 1989.

"I stumbled across environmental health, as many nurses do," she says.

At Virginia Mason, she promoted health, wellness and safety at job sites for companies who contracted with the hospital's clinics — ranging from Todd Shipyards to the Seattle Police Department to farms employing migrant workers.

"I got the bulk of my experience on the job; I learned a little bit about each industry." While at Virginia Mason, Bowman earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Nursing from the University of Washington — Bothell in 2001 before

leaving to pursue a master's degree in 2002.

Her clients at Virginia Mason still asked for her so she opened Karen Bowman & Associates in 2003 before finishing her degree. The company's first area of emphasis is occupational health, working to improve health and safety on job sites.

In a recent week, she'd been to a bricklayers' and masons' work site to talk with Hispanic workers about their right to know which chemicals they were using and how those chemicals might be affecting them. She'd gone to a foundry to assess workers' hearing and talk about hazardous conditions. And she did tuberculosis testing and gave vaccinations at a biomedical company.

"I put on steel-toed boots and a hard hat to go to the foundry and a lab coat and a \$400 suit to go to the biomedical firm," she quips.

The company's second emphasis is environmental health — protecting and improving the human environment by educating nurses, legislators and corporate clients. This work dovetails with her position as the Washington State Nurses Association's environmental health specialist and puts Bowman on the front lines of bringing meaningful changes to state law, helping to make Washington a national leader in anti-toxics legislation.

Her advocacy grew out of her work on job sites and the hazardous chemicals she found there, and she says her occupational and environmental health efforts complement each other. "Two of the most vulnerable populations are workers and children," she adds. "They often don't have a voice."

ON THE OFFENSIVE AGAINST TOXINS

Bowman is on the steering committee of the Toxic-Free Legacy Coalition, an alliance of 50 organizations across the state working to reduce toxins. Before the 2010 legislative session, eight to 10 people from the coalition met in Bowman's backyard to discuss their next campaign. Bisphenol A (also known as BPA) came up.

Bisphenol A is a bad actor. It's an organic compound used to make polycarbonate plastic and epoxy resins. It's clear and shatterproof, making it ideal for baby and sports bottles. Bowman says 97 percent of Americans have it in their bodies. It's been known to be "estrogenic" — mimicking the effects of estrogen in the body — since the 1930s, but studies in 2008 raised concerns about its effects on obesity, diabetes, heart disease, children's brain and reproductive development and possibly breast and prostate cancer.

The group decided to try to get BPA banned in certain products, especially those made for babies and children, whose smaller, developing bodies are



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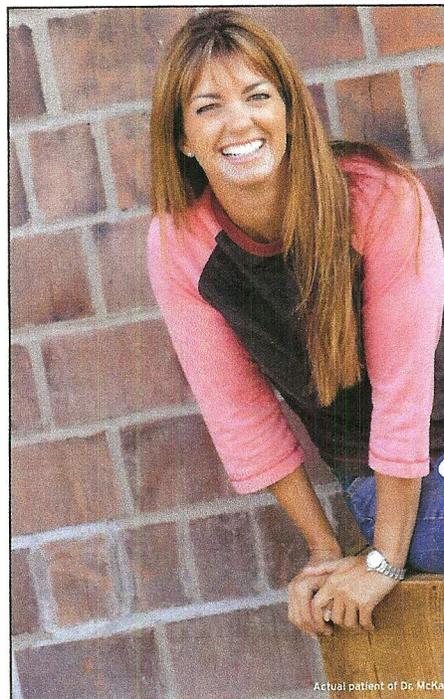
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"We're banning one chemical at a time, and there are more than 80,000 chemicals."

more vulnerable to its effects. Bowman and many others lobbied the legislature with a barrage of information and appeals, placing a giant inflatable baby bottle on the capitol steps in Olympia to draw visual attention to their cause. You can't get much more "grassroots" than this.

The result was passage of the 2010 Safe Baby Bottle Act, which bans BPA in baby bottles and children's dishware beginning in July 2011, and bans it in sports bottles in July 2012. Washington was the second state in the nation to ban the chemical.

Two years earlier, Bowman and her colleagues used a big inflatable rubber ducky to illustrate the need for a Children's Safe Products Act. The 2008 law was the first in the nation to limit the amounts of lead, cadmium and phthalates allowed in toys and other children's products sold in the state.

"We pushed the federal legislation," Bowman says of the national Consumer Product Safety Improvement Act passed by Congress three months later. The federal law supersedes that part of the Washington law, but not the second half of the law requiring manufacturers to disclose chemicals of concern in children's products.

In 2011, Bowman and others are lobbying in Olympia to amend the Children's Safe Products Act. The bill (HB 1319/SB 5231) would require the Departments of Ecology and Health to look at the lists of potentially toxic chemicals in children's toys and other products and to prioritize those that pose the greatest risk. Manufacturers of the highest priority products would have to assess whether and how alternative, safer substances can be used.

"Our opponents say that toy manufacturers won't continue to sell here and it will hurt businesses," Bowman says. She doesn't agree with that assessment, but bristles at the philosophy behind it. "Which is most important, children's safety or money?"

Bowman's second legislative priority for 2011, shared by the Washington State Nurses Association, is passage of a Secure Medicine Take-Back Bill (SB 5234/HB1370).

"We're trying to get the pharmaceutical companies to be required to take back unused medications," Bowman explains. Up to 30 percent of medications go unused, according to Take Back Your Meds, an advocacy group of health organizations, police, drugstores, local governments, environmental groups and others. Passage of the bill could reduce access to highly addictive drugs, reduce the risk of poisonings and reduce environmental contamination. Lobbyists for the pharmaceutical industry have blocked the legislation for the past two years.

There's a precedent for the take-back idea, Bowman says. In 2006, Washington became the first state to pass an "e-waste" law requiring electronics manufacturers to pay for recycling computers, TVs and other electronic wastes, keeping heavy metals and flame retardants from polluting lakes and oceans. In 2010, the legislature passed a law establishing a producer-financed product stewardship program for the collection, recycling and disposal of mercury-containing lights. Beginning in 2013, it will be unlawful to put compact fluorescent lightbulbs in the garbage.

Through her company and as an individual, Bowman gives input to the Department of Ecology on the statewide effort to draft action plans to reduce the numbers of persistent bioaccumulative toxins (PBTs).

Basically these are chemicals that persist in the environment, perhaps decades after they've been banned, and accumulate in the bodies of animals and humans. The first one tackled was mercury in 2003; the second was polybrominated diphenyl ethers (PBDEs, mostly used as flame retardants in electronics and furniture) in 2006; the third was lead in 2009. Bowman worked directly on the plan to reduce lead exposure by recalling some toys and jewelry and collecting data on blood levels. Further alphabet soups of man-made chemicals will be addressed in the next few years.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

Leaning back in her chair and sipping her tea, Bowman admits to being frustrated with nibbling around the edges of the issue. "We're banning one chemical at a time, and there are more than 80,000 chemicals [on the Environmental Protection Agency's list]," Bowman says.

Current federal law is the Toxic Substances Control Act, passed in 1976. "Most of the chemicals were grandfathered in," Bowman says, meaning that about 62,000 of the chemicals were free from scrutiny. In the past 30 years, the EPA has tested 200 chemicals and banned only five, according to the Washington Toxics Coalition and the national advocacy group Safer Chemicals, Healthy Families. "The overarching goal is federal chemical policy reform," Bowman says. "All of the protocols the Federal Drug Administration requires for drugs aren't done for chemicals."

She recently talked with Congressman Dave Reichert about supporting an updated federal law which failed to gain traction in 2010 but has been reintroduced for 2011. Proponents want tougher laws to phase out persistent bioaccumulative toxic chemicals and increase research on safer alternatives.

They also want to require companies that make and use chemicals to provide full information about the impact of all their chemicals on health and the environment and for regulators to have more tools to require reductions in toxins.

Bowman isn't discouraged about the huge agenda, though. Her eyes shine when she talks about all she learns from her students. "It gives me the biggest joy to teach nurses," she says. She speaks of bringing nurses "back to their roots as environmental health specialists," noting that from the time of Florence Nightingale, nurses have been concerned with putting patients in the best environment for them to heal — with good air, clean water, good sanitation and good light.

"Instead of infectious diseases and sanitation, we talk more about toxics reduction now when we think of environmental health," she says. "Nurses are everywhere, and we're one of the most trusted professions; we're sought after to lend our voice on public policy." ■

Wenda Reed is a Seattle-area writer and frequent contributor to Seattle Woman.

To find out more about the Washington Toxics Coalition and legislative campaigns to ban unsafe chemicals, visit www.watoxics.org.

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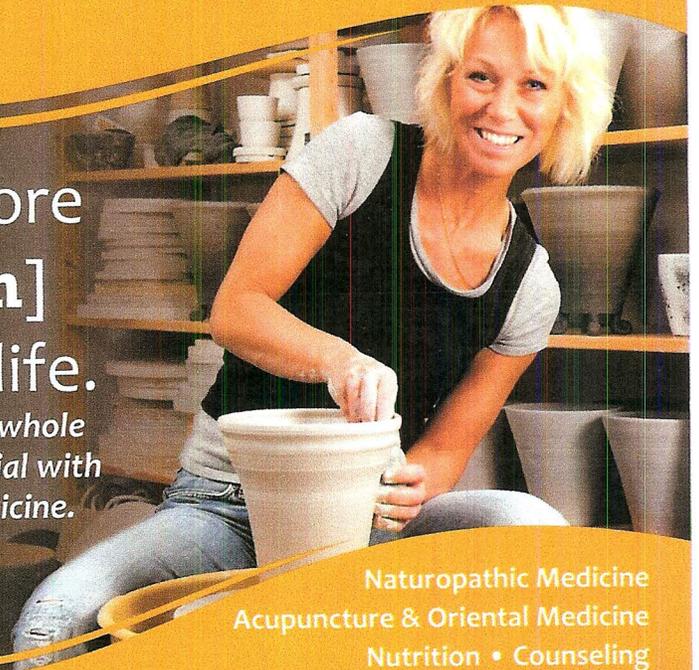


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