



Will Workers in the Gulf Be the Next Victims of Environmentally Induced Cancer?

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As we all watch the oil continue to gush into the Gulf of Mexico, many of us are also watching the stories of the workers unfold: those who were aboard the Deepwater Horizon, those who are helping in the cleanup, and the thousands of people whose livelihood is being wiped out along with the ecosystem of the gulf.

The story of the workers on the oil rig illustrates the life and times of many workers in the US today. Told to buck up, take responsibility and to be happy for the jobs they have, workers are often lacking basic training and protections from the materials and in many cases, especially for low wage workers, they can be fired at any time. We all keep working, despite the hazards, to feed our families and keep a roof over our heads.

While [official unemployment rates](#) remain near over 9%, and as high as 16% for communities of color, the idea that workers have a choice about where to work, and how to keep themselves safe, is a fading mirage. As BP continues to be unable to stop the spillover, in the gulf or in the media, the lie we have lived with, that corporations are somehow motivated to look out for the greater good, is eroding along with shorelines, jobs, and ecosystems.

When the [President's Cancer Panel](#) issued its report last week, it was a confirmation of what workers and their families have long suspected. "The true burden of environmentally induced cancer has been grossly underestimated." The Report also calls for a thorough assessment of workplace exposures and cancer risks. It even includes recommendations more attention paid to the unequal burden of carcinogenic exposures borne by "migrant and other farmworkers, and residents of high-poverty areas and cancer 'hot spots'" to reduce their risks.

It is a rare day that people like us have our own words echoed by a Presidential panel, and these fine folks were appointees of the previous administration. So, in the face of a lot of hard news, we have a bounce in our step.

As people who work every day with farmworkers, nail salon workers, and other low-wage, immigrant workers, we know firsthand that the people who are doing the dirty work that in some cases some refuse to do? These workers are also getting sick at rates beyond the already high rates of the general population.

Our own [work with nail salon workers](#), along with mounting evidence from other studies, shows that nail salon workers may experience disproportionate rates of multiple myeloma, stomach cancer, and mixed lymphoma as well of a host of other illness. In California, most nail salon workers are Vietnamese, and often a number of family members work in the industry. That means that entire families are at higher risk of losing mothers, aunts, grandmothers and cousins.

Farmworker families are also hit in multiple ways. Not only are entire families often employed in the same industry, the toxic chemicals that parents are exposed to at work often come home on clothes, shoes and even skin and hair. Additionally, the children are often exposed at school and in their neighborhoods to pesticide drift, and worse. For farmworkers and their families, this round-the-clock exposure has led to cancer rates that are among the highest in the country.

The question remains alive for all of us with cancer in our family histories: if the genetic gun is loaded, what determines when and if environment pulls the trigger? How many toxic chemicals in our workplace are enough, and when is exposure going to trigger cancer? For any individual we don't know how much is too much until it's too late.

The Cancer Panel returned a verdict: carcinogens in the workplace are hastening illness and death for many, especially those with the lowest wages and the fewest choices.

The chemical industry would have us believe that we can't act to reduce our exposures without complete certainty over each chemical and its likelihood to cause cancer. This report calls upon us all, in our homes, our board rooms and our legislatures, to see things differently: that until we can prove that this chemical stew we live in is not hurting us, let's reduce exposures for all, and pay special attention to those who are most vulnerable.

Fortunately, there are many great efforts already underway to make the workplace safer for all of us. [The Safe Chemicals Act](#) is a good start, as are specific regulations on BPA to protect all of us along with our children. There are many lessons to draw from the disaster in the gulf. Let one be this: quick, decisive action in the name of prevention is a lot easier than massive clean up.

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