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HEADLINE: SCARES BUILT ON FLIMSY INFORMATION

BYLINE: Louis W. Sullivan

Through the decades as a public health professional, I've observed a pattern in health scares that produces a predictable cycle of unfounded fear, litigation, overreaction and -- ultimately -- reassessment. I refer to this pattern as "the public health fear factor." The recent conclusions of a panel of experts commissioned to study possible health effects resulting from exposure to treated wood in playgrounds lead me to believe that this phenomenon has occurred once again.

The public health fear factor generally is initiated when some in the media rush ahead of science and established evidence to hurriedly report that exposure to an everyday product could result in dire health effects.

In this case, focus has been put on wood treated with chromated copper arsenate, a preservative used for nearly 70 years to keep wooden structures safe from the effects of insects and the elements. This wood is commonly used in a variety of applications with which we are all familiar -- decks, fencing, and playground structures. It's the latter application that has created the recent fuss, which erupted first in Florida and then grew nationwide.

While no responsible scientist would ever suggest that arsenic is completely harmless, it's imperative in matters of science that judgments be based on research and evidence. That's why the Florida Department of Health correctly responded to a wave of media reports on the potential dangers of CCA-treated playground equipment in Florida by commissioning an expert panel, the "Physicians Arsenic Work Group," to evaluate the risk associated with its use.

This group recently finished its assessment and concluded that the data "have not demonstrated any clinical disease associated with arsenic exposure from the use of the CCA-treated wood." The physicians' group "agrees with and supports the United States Environmental Protection Agency's directive that 'EPA does not recommend that consumers replace or remove existing structures made with CCA-treated wood or the soil surrounding those structures.'"

Today, my message to parents who are worried and are considering keeping their children off of public playgrounds is simply this: relax, the evidence is that your children are safe. I am, however, concerned about a bigger issue, which is the tendency in our

society to devote tremendous attention and resources to phantom risks, based on an anecdote or a media report.

The far greater risk to our children is allowing them to be sedentary and spend their free hours in front of a television screen instead of in the playground. By some estimates, one-third of our children and adolescents are overweight. Obese children grow up to be obese adults. In turn, this is associated with increased risks of diabetes, heart attack, stroke and other diseases.

The parental instinct to protect our children is a precious and community-strengthening commodity. Parents and others responsible for the health and safety of children should be constantly vigilant. But, when it comes to matters of science, be wary of hype, error and incomplete information. That's the best way to overcome the public health fear factor.

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