

• **News and Voices**

The humidifier disinfectant incident and the self-examination of environmental toxicology and public health experts

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Asian Citizen's Center for Environment and Health is an environmental non-governmental organization that specializes in the Environment and Public Health sector. On December 21, at the 2015 Citizen's Awards for Environment and Public Health, they awarded the Citizen's Award to 3 members of the UK overseas protest group for victims of humidifier disinfectant, and to Seong-Woo Ahn, who led the Busan-to-Seoul bicycle protest for the same cause. Having heard this news, it fills me with anger that our society still does not know the total number of humidifier disinfectant victims, and that Oxy Reckitt Benckiser and the other companies at fault have offered neither an apology nor any other form of compensation.

Resolving the incident of mass deaths caused by humidifier disinfectant required contributions not only from physicians and epidemiologists, but also from environmental toxicologists. The fact that toxicologists were able to perform such a positive role, from another perspective, means that they might have been able to recognize the causes of widespread lung damage occurring in pregnant women and children at an earlier stage, before the incident grew in scale.

Given that about 8 million people in South Korea are estimated to have used humidifier disinfectant, clearly this number will also include several toxicologists and public health experts. If even one of them had suspected that the toxic chemicals in disinfectants, such as polyhexamethylene guanidine and oligo(2-(2-ethoxy)ethoxyethyl guanidine, could damage the body when inhaled through the lungs, this disaster might have been prevented.

I was in charge of editing the "White Paper on the Health-related Damage Caused by Humidifier Disinfectant," published in December 2014 under the aegis and support of the Ministry of Health and Welfare's Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and in the Introduction to that paper, I described the incident as a "household-goods disaster born of corporate complacency and institutional paralysis." The purpose of defining the nature of the incident and publishing a white paper is to create awareness and reflect upon painful experiences of the past, and thereby ensure that similar incidents do not recur.

Researchers in the fields of environmental toxicology and public health need to treat this incident as a warning to pay closer attention to the household products around them, and ensure that they do not contain dangerous, life-threatening products that could damage health. After all, risks that are not apparent to the general public may be clear to the eyes of an expert. In particular, toxicologists and public health experts should always question whether various chemicals used in day-to-day life and the substances in household products are actually safe.

One aspect of this incident that could be considered somewhat exceptional is that some researchers in the field of Environment and Public Health gathered their own funds to conduct an investigation and publish a report before the government prepared their own investigation into the victims of the humidifier disinfectant incident. When similar incidents occur in the future, it would be good to see environmental toxicologists and public health researchers not restrict themselves to their universities and laboratories, but to be out in the field among the victims struggling with the pain of losing family and waiting for a warm and friendly hand.

Conflict of Interest

The author has no conflicts of interest associated with material presented in this paper.

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