

May 23, 2005

**Washington State Public Health Association**

***Resolution***

**Submittal: October 2005 Annual Meeting**

**Title: Protecting Public Health by Adopting the Precautionary Principle as an Approach to Decision Making**

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**Whereas:** Every resident of Washington State has an equal right to conditions that protect and promote human health, including a healthy and safe environment; and

**Whereas:** All children of Washington State have an equal right to conditions that ensure they can reach and maintain their full potential; and

**Whereas:** Washington State recognizes that “health is a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing, not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” and a fundamental human right<sup>i</sup>; and

**Whereas:** Experience and scientific knowledge have demonstrated that even low levels of exposure to agents can affect sensitive individuals (e.g. lead and children)<sup>ii</sup>; and

**Whereas:** Many Washington State adults and children are exposed to hazardous toxins in their homes, schools, workplaces and communities and can suffer negative health consequences as a result<sup>iii</sup>; and

**Whereas:** Many conditions, including asthma, cancer, Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, birth defects, behavioral disorders, Autism, and chemical sensitivities, have been linked to environmental toxicants, which incur enormous individual and societal costs in Washington State<sup>iv</sup> and nationally<sup>v</sup>; and

**Whereas:** Approximately eighty-five thousand synthetic chemicals have been developed for use over the last six decades, most of which have not been tested for human toxicity; and

**Whereas:** This growing knowledge confers an ethical responsibility and duty to make decisions that promote and maintain human and environmental health, thereby preventing disease, illness or disability<sup>viii</sup>; and

- Whereas:** A principle for guiding activities to promote a healthy and safe environment and encourage human health is known as the precautionary principle; and
- Whereas:** The precautionary principle consists of four basic elements: 1) taking preventive action in the face of uncertainty, 2) shifting the burden of responsibility of safety to the proponents of an activity; 3) exploring and implementing safer alternatives to possibly harmful actions, and 4) increasing public participation in decision making; and
- Whereas:** The precautionary principle holds that when an activity threatens harm to human health or to the environment, precautionary measures should be taken, even if cause-and-effect relationships are not fully established scientifically<sup>viii,ix</sup>; and
- Whereas:** Taking precautionary action is the common sense idea behind many adages, such as "be careful", "better safe than sorry" and "look before you leap" and is inherent in the understanding of the Hippocratic oath of "first, do no harm", in essence, the principle goes hand in hand with prevention, the cornerstone of public health ; and
- Whereas:** Precautionary action is the basis of many activities designed to protect the health and safety of United States citizens, such as requirements of the federal Food and Drug Administration to ensure that new drugs are efficacious and safe before being placed on the market, requirements of the federal Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970 that require employers to provide safe workplaces and working conditions, and the Food Quality Protection Act of 1996 that acknowledges additional protection for children; and
- Whereas:** The precautionary principle has been incorporated in international environmental treaties and in health, environment and educational policies of numerous governmental entities in the United States, including the city of San Francisco, and that Seattle includes a statement on the precautionary principle in the City's Comprehensive Plan<sup>x</sup>; and
- Whereas:** The precautionary principle has been endorsed by the American Public Health Association<sup>xi,xii,xiii</sup> and hundreds of other organizations nationally and internationally<sup>xiv</sup>; and
- Whereas:** The precautionary principle is a highly effective decision-making tool for reducing negative and costly effects on human health resulting from exposure to environmental toxicants<sup>xv</sup>; and
- Whereas:** The precautionary principle focuses on opportunities to promote environmental and economic justice, including meaningful participation of

communities in decisions affecting their citizens' health, to protect the environment and to safeguard the health of all people of Washington State;

### **Therefore, Be It**

**Resolved, that:** The Washington State Public Health Association (WSPHA) endorses the precautionary principle as the basis of our approach to human and environmental health in Washington State; and be it further

**Resolved, that:** The WSPHA encourages further development and use of the precautionary principle across all City, County and State agencies in Washington State; and be it further

**Resolved, that:** The WSPHA reiterates its commitment to ensuring that all people have an opportunity to reach and maintain their full potential, recognizing that the precautionary principle serves as a foundation to achieve this goal.

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### References

<sup>i</sup> WHO Alma-Ata Declaration (1978).

<sup>ii</sup> European Environment Agency. Late lessons from early warning: the precautionary principle 1896-2000. Environment Issue Report No. 22; 2001.

<sup>iii</sup> Davies, K. (2005) *Health and Environmental Contaminants in Washington State: What We Know and What We Need to Know*. Antioch University Seattle. (<http://www.iceh.org/pdfs/CHE-WA/AntiochStudy1-05.pdf>).

<sup>iv</sup> Davies, K. *Economic Costs of Diseases and Disabilities Attributable to Environmental Contaminants in Washington State*. Antioch University Seattle. (in preparation, personal communication).

<sup>v</sup> Landrigan, P. J., Schechter, C. B., Lipton, J. M., Fahs, M. C., and Schwartz, J. (2002). Environmental pollutants and disease in American children: estimates of morbidity, mortality, and costs for lead poisoning, asthma, cancer, and developmental disabilities. *Environ Health Perspect* 110, 721-8.

<sup>vi</sup> Gilbert, S. (2005). Ethical, Legal, and Social Issues: Our Children's Future. *Neurotoxicology* 27.

<sup>vii</sup> Rosenblatt, R. A. (2005). Ecological change and the future of the human species: can physicians make a difference? *Ann Fam Med* 3, 173-6.

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<sup>viii</sup> Tickner, J. A. (2002). Precautionary principle encourages policies that protect human health and the environment in the face of uncertain risks. *Public Health Rep* 117, 493-7.

<sup>ix</sup> Gilbert, S.G. (2005). Public Health and The Precautionary Principle. *Northwest Public Health*, Spring/Summer 2005, 4.

<sup>x</sup> Environment Element, City of Seattle's Comprehensive Plan, Department of Planning & Development (2005). ([http://www.seattle.gov/dpd/Planning/Seattle's\\_Comprehensive\\_Plan/DPD\\_001178.asp](http://www.seattle.gov/dpd/Planning/Seattle's_Comprehensive_Plan/DPD_001178.asp))

<sup>xi</sup> Raffensperger, C., Tickner, J., ed. (1999). *Protecting Public Health & the Environment: Implementing the Precautionary Principle*. Island Press, Washington, D.C.

<sup>xii</sup> APHA Policy Statement #9606: The Precautionary Principle and Chemical Exposure Standards for the Workplace. APHA Policy Statements; 1948–present, cumulative. Washington, DC: American Public Health Association.

(<http://www.apha.org/legislative/policy/policysearch/index.cfm?fuseaction=view&id=124>)

<sup>xiii</sup> APHA Policy Statement #200011: The Precautionary Principle and Children's health. APHA Policy Statements; 1948–present, cumulative. Washington, DC: American Public Health Association. (<http://www.apha.org/legislative/policy/policysearch/index.cfm?fuseaction=view&id=216>)

<sup>xiv</sup> List of endorsing organizations as well as additional information on the Precautionary Principle is in the Seattle Precautionary Principle White Paper: A Policy Framework for Adopting the Precautionary Principle. The white paper and more updated date information is available at <http://www.asmalldoseof.org/precautionary/index.php>.

<sup>xv</sup> Ashford, N. A. (2004). Implementing the Precautionary Principle: incorporating science, technology, fairness, and accountability in environmental, health, and safety decisions. *Int J Occup Med Environ Health* 17, 59-67.

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