Role of Stockholm Convention regional centres in assisting Parties to implement the obligations under the Convention | The Stockholm Convention | Transboundary Waste shipment | Chemical Management Services and REACH | REACH and Communication of Uses | Development of new solvents - safer to use and less contaminating - and their application to the paints and varnishes sector (Solvsafe Project) | System of Rice Intensification - Towards sustainable agriculture | Contact details
SUMMARY

PRESENTATION ......................................................................................................................... 3

FEATURE ARTICLE Role of Stockholm Convention regional centres in assisting Parties to implement the obligations under the Convention. Suman Sharma. Stockholm Convention Secretariat ......................................................................................................................... 7

THE STOCKHOLM CONVENTION The success to battling persistent organic pollutants starts with a strong foundation. John A. Haines / Brandon Turner. UNITAR ................................................................................................................................................. 17

Distribution of blood concentrations of persistent organic pollutants in representative samples of the general population. Miquel Porta, Magda Gasull, Tomás López, and José Pumarega. IMIM and UAB ............................................................................................................................................. 24

The Green Screen for Safer Chemicals: charting the path to safer chemicals in products. Lauren Heine, Mark Rossi and Beverley Thorpe. Clean Production Action ............................................................................................................................................. 32

An Egyptian Experience in Facing the Environmental Challenges. Ahmed Kamal Abdel Moneim. Environmental Compliance office and Sustainable Development office Manager ............................................................................................................................................. 37

BASEL CONVENTION Transboundary Waste shipment. Pep Tarifa. Fundació Fòrum Ambiental ................................................................................................................................................. 43

REACH Chemical Management Services and REACH “It’s all about information”. Yasser Askar, M.Sc. Egyptian Environmental Affairs Agency ............................................................................................................................................. 48

Reach and Communication of Uses. Rosana Marín Sanchez ............................................................................................................................................. 53

Development of new solvents - safer to use and less contaminating - and their application to the paints and varnishes sector (SOLVSAFE PROJECT). Pedro Guerra Brito. AFAQUIM/SOLVSAFE ............................................................................................................................................. 56


CONTACT DETAILS ................................................................................................................... 65

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Here is little as individuals we can do to decrease our personal accumulation of persistent organic pollutants (POPs). Prevention of human POP contamination cannot be treated as an individual problem; rather, population strategies are required. It is hence surprising that systems that monitor human contamination by POPs in a representative sample of the general population are so scarce worldwide, and that few efforts have been devoted to the representation and analysis of the full population distribution of POP concentrations in humans. “POP Geoffrey Rose curves” help visualize that such distributions stem from and belong to a population, and emphasize the importance of shifting the whole distribution of POP concentrations through public and private policies (e.g., policies to decrease contamination of animal feed and human food, industrial emissions and residues).

Keywords: human biomonitoring; global health; health survey; persistent organic pollutants; pesticide residues; environmental pollutants / toxicity / prevention and control; environmental exposure / adverse effects; human samples; general population.
Persistent organic pollutants (POPs) as dioxins, dichlorodiphenyltrichloro-ethane (DDT), hexachlorobenzene (HCB), hexachlorocyclohexanes (HCHs), and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) are highly lipophilic and resistant to degradation; they thus bioaccumulate in the environment, food chains and living organisms, and are known or reasonably suspected to harm human health [1-8]. Their potential adverse effects include neurotoxicity [6,9], endocrine disruption and reproductive disorders [10-12], cardiovascular effects [4,6,13], and carcinogenicity (through a variety of mechanisms, including indirect, non-genotoxic mechanisms) [14-18]. As a consequence, many of these global and local (glocal) contaminants have been targeted for elimination or reduction by governments, and treaties as the Stockholm convention encourage countries to integrate population-based surveillance of POP levels in humans within their health monitoring schemes [3,8,19]. It is hence surprising that systems that monitor human contamination by POPs in a representative sample of the general population are so scarce worldwide [1].

In the general population, lifelong accumulation of POPs is largely the result of low-dose contamination of fatty foods [4-7,13,20-23]. There is little individuals can do to decrease personal exposure over the long term, and prevention of human POP contamination cannot be treated simply as an individual problem; rather, population strategies are required [1,24,25]. Therefore, it is also surprising that few efforts have been devoted to a rigorous representation and analysis of the full population distribution of POP concentrations in humans. It is also remarkable how little is known on the properties of such distributions.

Since the end of World War II, vast changes have occurred in human exposure to POPs in most populations worldwide: while the body burden of many compounds (e.g., some organochlorines) first increased and then decreased, levels of other POPs seem stagnant, and new synthetic chemicals as flame retardants have in recent years contaminated humans [1-7]. Surveillance of such patterns has seldom been undertaken on a nationwide, continued basis, and the generalizability of many studies is often limited [1,4,26-28]. Certainly, concentrations have been assessed in etiological studies and in some programs based on volunteers and convenience samples [1]. Surprisingly, however, only the USA and Germany regularly monitor POP concentrations in representative samples of the general population [4,7,29-36].

Monitoring programs are useful to quantify trends and patterns of human exposure to POPs and other environmental chemical agents, to identify highly exposed minorities [8,26,27,37], and as a framework to evaluate health impacts and the effectiveness of policies aimed at decreasing exposure to POPs [7,37,38].

**Plotting the curves**

Density plots can be used to chart the distributions of POP body concentrations in the different age and sex population groups. We name these graphs “POP Geoffrey Rose curves” to emphasize the analogy with the ‘popula-
tion strategy’ of the British epidemiologist (1926-1993) [1,24,25]. Several properties of the curves are interesting; e.g., kurtosis, skewness, and coefficient of variation. Kurtosis is a measure of the peakedness or sharpness of the peak of a distribution curve, i.e., of the extent to which the curve is flatter or more peaked. Skewness is a measure of asymmetry in frequency distributions, i.e., the degree to which frequencies trail towards extreme scores in one direction away from the majority of cases. The normal distribution is symmetric and thus has zero skewness.

In many populations worldwide there are huge interindividual differences in POP concentrations. In the general population of Catalonia, for instance, the highest individual concentration of p,p'-DDE (9036.01 ng/g) is over 7700 times higher than the lowest (1.17 ng/g); for HCB the corresponding values are 4798.57 and 0.79 ng/g (a 6000-fold difference), and for β-HCH, 2716.16 and 1.35 ng/g (2000-fold). Figure 1 shows the population distribution of HCB concentrations by sex. They were significantly higher in women than men even after adjusting by age and BMI.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of p,p'-DDE by age group; with respect to older groups, the distribution of youngest individuals leans towards the left (lower DDE levels). There is a progressive flattening of the curves with increasing age. The kurtosis of each of the two younger groups is higher than that of the two older groups; i.e., in the younger groups DDE concentrations cluster more around a few values than in the older groups. Furthermore, the skewness of the distribution of the two younger groups is about twice as large than that of the two older groups. In addition, the coefficient of variation of the distribution of DDE decreases from the younger to the older groups. This phenomenon can be summarised as: curve flattening, decreasing kurtosis, decreasing skewness, and decreasing coefficient of variation in increasingly older groups.

In many studies worldwide, the median, mean, geometric mean, standard deviation, maximum value, 25th percentile and 75th percentile of commonly detected POPs usually in-
crease with increasing age group. Sometimes, a remarkable exception is the minimum value (the lower individual concentration of a POP), which may be quite similar in all age groups; i.e., among middle-aged and older subjects, a minority fails to accumulate the higher amounts of each POP that a majority accrues. This facet of the problem coexists with the fact that a vast majority of the population has much lower concentrations of POPs than a certain minority.

**POP Geoffrey Rose curves**

While several programs have yielded relevant information, there are very few reports worldwide based on a representative sample of the general population [1-8,28,32-36,41]. We suggest there is a need to focus on the whole population distributions of POP concentrations and their properties. A distribution may seem a simple representation if viewed only from a technical angle. However, as conceived, drawn and interpreted in this article, distributions of POP concentrations clearly stem from and belong to a population, they reflect the inherently population nature of the issues at stake, and thus convey pedagogically a core message: individual concentrations of POPs result from societal processes, there is little an individual can do to decrease personal exposure, and POP contamination cannot be viewed just as an individual problem. Our “POP Geoffrey Rose curves” emphasize the importance of shifting the whole population distribution of POP concentrations through public and private policies (e.g., policies to decrease contamination of animal feed and human food, industrial emissions and residues) [24,25].

When we compare POP curves of different regions it is important to remember that differences may partly be explained by subtle differences in laboratory and epidemiologic methods (e.g., the age range of participants), as well as by the ethnic composition of each country [1,7]. Although the US reports and the Germany surveys do not present the full distribution of POP concentrations, they do offer selected percentiles; from such data the distribution in the US and German populations can be estimated. Figure 3 shows the distributions of serum concentrations of p,p’-DDE in the USA and Catalonia. The shapes are remarkably similar, although the US curve trails further towards the left than the curve for Catalonia: there is a higher proportion of Americans in the zone of lower p,p’-DDE values and a higher proportion of Catalans with higher concent-

**Shifting the population distribution of POP concentrations requires more energetic public and private policies**

![Figure 3. Distribution of concentrations of dichlorodiphenyldichloroethene (p,p’-DDE) in the populations of USA and Catalonia](image)

- **Catalonia 2002**
  - Median: 412 ng/g
- **USA 2003-2004**
  - Median: 233 ng/g

Catalonia: population from 20 to 74 years of age; USA: population ≥ 20 years
low concentrations are not negligible [16-18].

Virtually all populations worldwide bear a body burden of environmental chemicals—with large interindividual and inter-population differences [1-6]. Programs that monitor such distributions in a representative sample of the general population are essential to establish reference levels, to analyze predictors of exposure, to increase public awareness, to stimulate prevention policies and, hence, to diminish the burden of disease that these chemicals contribute to cause.

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References


![Figure 4. Distribution of concentrations of hexachlorobenzene in the populations of Germany and Catalonia](image-url)
biphenyls in Finland. Food Addit Contam 2001; 18: 945-953.


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The Mediterranean Action Plan (MAP) strives to protect the environment and to foster development of the Mediterranean Basin. It was adopted in Barcelona (Spain) in 1975 by Mediterranean States and the EC, under the auspices of the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP). Its legal framework is made up of the Barcelona Convention (1976, revised in 1995) and seven Protocols covering certain specific aspects of environmental protection.

The Action Plan is built up around an Athens-based Coordinating Unit, the MED POL Programme and six Regional Activity Centres.

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