

# A tale of two colleges: is it really controversial to advise mothers about potential health effects of chemical exposures?

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## [From the 24 October 2013 post at Health & Environment](#)

This month (October 2013), the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) [published a Committee Opinion](#) about exposure to toxic environmental agents. It describes “reducing exposure to toxic environmental agents” as a “critical area of intervention” for reproductive health care professionals because of “robust” evidence linking exposure to environmental agents to a range of adverse reproductive and development health outcomes. The Opinion goes on to state that while reproductive health professionals should provide in-clinic counselling on reducing chemical exposure, they also have a role to play beyond the clinical setting, in advocate “timely action to identify and reduce exposure to toxic environmental agents”.

A similar paper was published on the same theme in the United Kingdom in June this year, when the UK equivalent of ACOG, the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG), issued a Scientific Impact Paper titled “[Chemical Exposures During Pregnancy](#)”. As did ACOG, the paper recommended a “safety-first approach” for dealing with the problem of being “exposed to a complex mixture of hundreds of chemicals at low levels” for which “methods for assessing the full risk of exposure are not yet developed”. A list of things which women can do to reduce their exposure was given, and it was suggested that this information be conveyed to women by reproductive health professionals.

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## Concluding remarks

The difference in reaction to two similar papers in the US and UK media should be surprising, given that in the US coverage of chemicals issues is now an everyday occurrence, while UK outlets (outside the confines of the famously sensationalist *Daily Mail*) are much less likely to cover chemicals stories. Yet here we have a minor publication intended for reproductive health professionals having almost unprecedented impact across all the major UK papers.

Some people undoubtedly wanted there to be a controversy. It sells papers, for one thing. But it does not follow that the originating point of the controversy is itself controversial: there is a very real difference between creating a controversy through eliciting and reporting criticism, and reporting on conflicting opinions which are a direct result of intellectual controversy. In the latter case the controversy is a natural event; in the former, it is a manufactured one.

Journalists, talking heads and commentators should all be cognizant of this, and be aware that if one is going to comment on a controversy, it will not advance issues by treating a manufactured debate as if it is a genuine controversy. The fact is, only Sense About Science, a small handful of university professors and a few trade associations originally had anything at all to say about the RCOG report – and these same faces popped up in almost all the UK media coverage.

Nobody else noticed that RCOG had published their “list” for mothers, and they would not have done had this small group of experts and reporters not made such a fuss about it – just as virtually nobody in the US noticed, barring an advocacy group with a conservative reputation and the US chemical industry trade association.

Link: <http://jflahiff.wordpress.com/2013/10/25/a-tale-of-two-colleges-is-it-really-controversial-to-advise-mothers-about-potential-health-effects-of-chemical-exposures/>