

LOCAL NEWS

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“Although you think you are not exposed, you are.”

CHUANWU XI, a University of Michigan professor who studies how antibiotics find their way into water



Photos by KIMBERLY P. MITCHELL/Detroit Free Press

Judy Lewis, left, Joseph Frank and Hillary Grabowski sort through drugs dropped off at the Detroit Medical Center Surgery Center in Madison Heights on Nov. 18. The event allowed people get rid of leftover medication properly.

KEEPING WATER DRUG-FREE

EFFORTS TO PROPERLY DISPOSE OF MEDICINE INCREASE

By MEGHA SATYANARAYANA
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

When her mother died in late October, Wendy Krakosky of Madison Heights wondered what to do with all her unused medications.

“They were just sitting there,” she said, holding open a bag of orange bottles and blister packs containing the drugs her mother took to prevent organ rejection, nausea and inflammation following a 2004 lung transplant.

Krakosky was one of many who descended upon the Detroit Medical Center Surgery Center in Madison Heights two weeks ago to get rid of unusable drugs in a campaign to clear out cupboards to clean up watersheds. At evening’s end, the community-based effort sent 300 pounds of prescription and over-the-counter medicines to an incinerator, rather than down a toilet, the trash or a sink.

Such campaigns are gaining momentum as trace amounts of drugs are being found in the water supply, from what people drink, to what they bathe in, to what they and Michigan’s critters splash around in during the summers.

“Although you think you are not exposed, you are,



The prescription and over-the-counter drugs wound up in an incinerator, rather than a toilet, trash or sink.

one way or another,” said Chuanwu Xi, a University of Michigan environmental health professor who studies how antibiotics find their way into water.

He has found antibiotic resistance genes in sewage bacteria getting around wastewater treatment and sneaking into the environment.

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Some of it can't easily be helped. Even digested pills contribute to the amount of antibiotics in wastewater, he said, and conventional wastewater treatment isn't designed to completely remove these micropollutants.

These sturdy chemicals, even in small amounts, can kill off natural bacteria in waterways, encourage microbes to become drug-resistant and poison fish, he said.

While immediate-exposure risks for humans are low, he said, no one has completed the long-term studies to see what continuous exposure to small amounts of drugs in the water supply might bring.

And pharmaceutical contamination of water supplies is a hot topic of research. At the 2008 meeting of the Society of Environmental Toxicology and Chemistry, which concluded Nov. 20, dozens of speeches, posters and research projects addressed the issue worldwide.

That same day, the Environmental Protection Agency announced its intent to streamline how health care facilities dispose of drugs, which it said amount to 10,600 tons a year combined for the largest producers.

Efforts to control the flow of drugs into water have been increasing for years. In 2004, Ann Arbor officials investigated what drugs, hormones and other cosmetic chemicals were swirling in the Huron River.

In several samples, they found small amounts of antibiotics, acetaminophen, epilepsy drugs, caffeine and steroids in river water, and some of the same chemicals persisted into drinking water.

In 2004, Macomb County's hazardous waste recycling program expanded to include drugs, said Cole Shoemaker, an environmental health supervisor. The program also takes

"We have 55-gallon drums full of pills after ... collections."

COLE SHOEMAKER, an environmental health supervisor in Macomb County

controlled substances, with the help of the sheriff's office and the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency.

It has gone from collecting 300 pounds a year to more than 1,000.

"We have 55-gallon drums full of pills after these collections," Shoemaker said, adding that it is a small fraction of what is out there.

At the Madison Heights event, people dropped off eye-drops, non-narcotic pain pills,



KIMBERLY P. MITCHELL/Detroit Free Press

Oakland Community College nursing students Joseph Frank, left, Mike Licata and Hillary Grabowski sort drugs at the Madison Heights drop-off.

antidepressants and blood pressure medicines, to name a few. Getting them away from curious teens was a primary goal of the event, said Judy Lewis of the Madison Heights Coalition, a sponsoring partner. She wants a permanent community partner to accept

drugs in a secure container, so unused drugs can be safely disposed of every day.

"I'll buy it, if I can find someone to house it," she said.

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