

1-9-09

My mother used to say, "If you want it done right, do it yourself." While I don't advocate that as a good idea for parenting, as children will be happy to let anyone else do their work but will feel guilty later on and, also, children need to learn responsibility; I can understand why my mother came to that conclusion. It certainly takes a lot more energy to teach, guide and oversee children than it does to give in and let them go. So, it is understandable that she sometimes spared herself the frustration and she accomplished what she wanted done and the way she wanted it done.

I think of her now, though, in other circumstances where doing it yourself seems the wise thing to do. For instance, when we need answers or when we need an advocate, it seems we can best accomplish that by ourselves. We can receive assistance but we have to stay in charge and stay informed.

Staying informed is more challenging each day, as life seems to get progressively more complicated each and every day. I guess complicated is okay if we can figure out how to handle the complications. What do we do, though, when we aren't even aware of it? A topic that continues to fascinate and amaze me is the ever-increasing use of chemicals in ways that are not imagined by the average person and in ways that are not clearly disclosed, either. We are living in a world of genetically modified foods and personal care products built from the ground up with chemicals to enhance whatever the goal is, say, smooth skin or shiny hair. Our mattresses are drenched in fire retardants and most homes have scented candles and plug-in deodorizers as routine items. We can even add chemicals to our laundry to render them sunblocking powers!

We assume that if these things are sold over the counter, some regulatory board has reviewed the items and determined their safety. You know those boards; the ones we complain about when we disagree and the ones we complain to when we want them to do more. How familiar that territory is to every local board of health! They are damned if they do and damned if they don't. No board knows everything, though, and we can assist them by providing information.

While providing information at the local level can be achieved, and may be possible at the state level, we don't have that connection with federal committees. Or maybe we just forget that this is a government by the people and for the people. Maybe federal boards and commissions will listen. We have to try, first, though, don't we?

This topic surfaced for me personally when I recently learned that some people cannot live with fluorescent lighting, as it emits UV rays and is damaging to people who are photosensitive. For instance, people with Lupus have to avoid sunlight by wearing sunblock, long sleeves and wide brimmed hats and they have to avoid fluorescent lights. With the very understandable push by environmentalists and legislators to switch from incandescent to fluorescent lighting, it is increasingly difficult to avoid the glare of fluorescent lights. Most people can safely make the switch to compact fluorescents in their home and they will not suffer from working and shopping under the fluorescent tubes. People with Lupus, however, will feel ill, develop rashes and even suffer sunburns from the UV rays emitted by the fluorescent lights.

I wonder how Lupus patients in Australia handle this? Will they need a prescription from their doctor? Will we have a special ballot question some day on an allowable number of incandescent lights, as we did for a small amount of marijuana being

non-criminal? Before this country's leaders head down that legislative road banning the use of incandescent lights, they need to hear about this health hazard at odds with the environmental goal.

While I am discovering the path to a listening ear on this topic, there is help for the individuals needing to avoid the harmful effects of fluorescent lights. Protective shields can be placed over them, blocking UV rays in the same way that sunglasses can. If you know of someone in need of this information, email me and I will send it to you. While it won't help when out shopping, at least at home and at work, we can take matters into our own hands.

I know my mother was usually angry at me when she said she'd rather do it herself, but if she could hear me now, I'd like her to know that I was able to learn a lesson from that phrase, after all.

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for the Town of Halifax, MA. She is interested in your comments and can be reached at 781 293 6768 or cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us