

## **Melamine**

### **Assembly 29 September 2008**

I am sure that you have been following the events in China over the past two weeks regarding the health problems of thousands of young children after being fed contaminated milk products.

The scale of the problem has been growing daily and the situation might still get worse before it gets better. An increasing number of dairy products from factories across China are returning positive results for contamination after being tested by the health authorities. At this point in time, more contaminated products are being identified; more young children are displaying serious health problems; and more Chinese dairy products are being taken off the shelves in food stores across the world. The situation is very serious.

The cause of the problem, as you are no doubt aware, is melamine. Melamine was first produced in a chemical laboratory in Germany in the 1830s. It has many uses in industry and can be found in numerous products that are used around the home. It is used in the manufacture of kitchen counters as an alternative to wood or stone. It is found in glue and used in the manufacture of clothing to reduce the chance of clothes catching fire. Melamine is also one of the major components in Pigment Yellow 150, a colourant that is added to ink and plastic.

Melamine has multiple uses and is an important component in numerous manufacturing processes. What is deeply concerning, however, is that its usage has not been confined to industry but has extended to the production of food for animals and humans.

It has been reported in the media that the practice of adding of melamine to animal feed is well-known and apparently widespread in China. The reason for adding melamine is to give the appearance that the animal feed has higher levels of protein than is actually the case. This is an illegal practice but one that some manufacturers have obviously been willing to employ. It would appear that the relevant authorities did not do their job properly by not testing the products or by turning a blind eye. It may well have been argued by some that, after all, this was only animal feed.

What is more difficult to understand is how melamine came to be added to food directly for human consumption. There is no question that the authorities will get to the bottom of this scandal. What they will no doubt discover is that melamine was deliberately added to human foods for the same reason it was added to animal feed; to give the impression that the product contained more protein than was indeed the case. It has also been suggested that melamine can hide the fact that milk is being watered down in order to save money.

Two weeks ago, the dairy company Sanlu recalled all powdered milk in Gansu province when it was disclosed that melamine was being used. Further tests showed that melamine had also been found in the products of 21 other companies. At this point in

time, more than 53,000 infants have fallen ill; almost 13,000 have been admitted to hospital; and four have died.

Consumption of melamine can lead to painful kidney stones, some more than 1cm in diameter, and can result in death. It can also lead to bladder cancer. Melamine has now been detected in animals raised on bottled milk formula, including apes and lions living in zoos and wildlife parks. These animals also have also developed kidney stones.

In the College Handbook is a section called the Charter of Rights and Responsibilities. The word 'charter' means a contract or an agreement.

The words of our Charter of Rights and Responsibilities start with:

“The aims of our school rules are to make each person aware of the importance of self- control and to develop a sense of responsibility for their own conduct and for the well-being of others”.

So how does the current melamine scandal relate to rights and responsibilities? Families in China have the right to buy milk powder and other dairy items safe in the knowledge that those products are free of harmful substances. This is a basic right not only for families on the mainland but for families worldwide.

Along with rights come corresponding responsibilities. The Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities, the declaration that complements the Declaration of Human Rights, has a number of statements. Three of the most powerful statements are:

- Every person has a responsibility to respect life.
- Every person is precious and must be protected unconditionally.
- Every person has a responsibility to behave with integrity, honesty and fairness.

It would appear that some manufacturers of dairy products did not hold similar views. Maybe they were ignorant of the harmful effects of melamine or underestimated the dangers. What may well be revealed in due course is that some manufacturers did know the dangers but added melamine regardless. We can only surmise that this was done to secure greater profit.

Rights and responsibilities apply in all settings; in businesses, governments, families and schools. It is important that you remember the rights of others and take responsibility for your actions. If you do this you will live your life with honesty and integrity and a genuine care for the welfare of others.

J R Kennard