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A Recent CBS Report Again Plays On Consumers' Cancer Fears. Can A Fragmented Industry Respond?

The drycleaning industry made an appearance in mainstream media Feb. 23 in CBS News' *Early Show's* "Cancer Danger from Dry Cleaning?" a report that questions the safety of perchloroethylene use and the wearing of drycleaned clothes. Following a now-familiar formula for media coverage, CBS launched the report with an interview of Mori Mickelson, a woman who experienced health problems while living above a New York City drycleaning plant in the 1990s. The segment casts suspicion on perc as a neurotoxin and possible carcinogen. The segment ends by warning viewers to avoid opening clothing bags from drycleaners inside their homes, where "toxic" perc vapors can linger for up to a week, as well as wearing clothes without airing them out.

The segment includes statements from government and other officials, with Nora Nealis, executive director of the National Cleaners Association (NCA), representing the industry's viewpoint. But how objective is it?

The report fails to mention that the Mickelson case is more than a decade old. In fact, New York City's Health Department forced this particular drycleaner to stop using perc in 1996, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) issued a 2020 deadline to end perc use in "colocated" facilities nationwide like the one downstairs from Mickelson last year. Few, if any, consumers now risk the exposure Mickelson experienced due to new regulations, improved work practices and equipment advancements.

"The story was pre-Part 232 regulations—it was old news, but was presented to the consumer as current news," says David Cotter, CEO of the Textile Care Allied Trades Association (TCATA). "The other interesting thing that they left out is that only between .5% and 1% of cleaners are in residential buildings in the U.S."

The biggest problem with reports like this one, though, is that they play off of consumer fears with insinuation or incomplete information. It is not yet known with any certainty if perc is a human carcinogen or not. According to the New York City Department of Health, "The currently available information is not sufficient to determine the health effects from low levels of perc exposure and

whether perc causes cancer in humans.”

The most recent EPA ruling on perc air emission standards for drycleaning facilities does not classify perc as a carcinogen, and the agency continues to study its health effects. An updated risk assessment should be released some time next year.

It's also important to note that in February 2006 the Halogenated Solvents Industry Alliance (HSIA) released the results of a study of drycleaners in Nordic countries that showed that perchloroethylene use carried no increased cancer risks.

Nealis, the only drycleaner quoted in the *Early Show* report, says this is typical of the media. “You can put half a ton of paper in front of them and say ‘this is the whole story,’ and they tell what they want to tell,” she says.

“We’re really at their mercy. Even if you share your argument with them, that’s not to say [that] the argument you make makes for good television. And if doesn’t make good television, it probably won’t see the light of day.”

“The industry defends perc effectively, considering we don’t have CBS’ budget,” according to Bill Fisher, CEO of the International Fabricare Institute (IFI). “The timing was very curious: This is sweeps week—they’ll be picking on drycleaning again. Sweeps week almost guarantees a story on drycleaning.”

California recently became the first U.S. state to ban perc, calling it a public health threat. Officials there suggest cleaners switch to more “environmentally safe” methods, such as wetcleaning. Is giving up on perc and switching to a different solvent a viable solution to the problem of regulation and poor publicity?

Some, like Nealis, believe that the attack against perc has little to do with the solvent itself, so endorsing a single “alternative” solvent industrywide would do little to prevent future scrutiny. “We have data that it’s not a carcinogen. Do we walk away from it just because we’re getting pressure, or do we stand up and say ‘this is not right’ and push back?” says Nealis. “If we allow that, every chemical becomes vulnerable. It’s not really about perc.”

“I would say we should defend perc as we should defend all chemical drycleaning,” says Cotter. “My view is that all chemical drycleaning is under attack. [The California Air Resources Board] made it fairly clear that they don’t like anything but water, and there are potential issues with all solvents, though it is clear that many regulators are not familiar with the science on many solvents. We should not and have not singled out perc alone to defend, but we are and should continue defending all safe chemical drycleaning.”

Some, like Fisher, say it’s dangerous not to defend perc because of the risk of

liability suits to anyone who uses it, or even retroactive liability suits to those who have used it in the past. “If someone comes along and says perc is 15 times more toxic and a possible human carcinogen, the cleanup standard is going to increase,” Fisher says. “If the media and the agencies can ratchet things up on perc, people are going to get hit hard.”

“We will defend anything that’s defensible, wherever the market is ready to go,” says David Norford, executive vice president of the MidAtlantic Association of Cleaners (MAC). “I think the marketplace is working on that already. No one has to get behind anything—it’s a natural progression. The free market is working; no one has to say you have to replace this with that. The *options*—I don’t like to use the word ‘alternatives’—the *options* have never been greater.”

Perhaps the real problem is people’s perception of drycleaners and drycleaning practices. If people better understood what drycleaners do, they might be less likely to lash out in fear. Some suggest that the relationship between a customer and their drycleaner is the best tool for fighting misconceptions.

“The cleaner has to be ready to discuss the issue openly and honestly with the customer,” says Nealis. “There’s a trust and a relationship there that goes beyond a sound bite. I think that the cleaner has more credibility with customers than the news media does; there is some skepticism about what you see on the news.”

Industry associations try to help out in this regard as much as possible, providing cleaners with the tools to communicate with their customers. NCA, TCATA, IFI and MAC all sent notices to their members via e-mail, warning them about possible negative reactions to the Early Show report and providing answers to anticipated questions.

“It may not do much good, but I don’t know what else can really be done except to alert people that it’s coming—to arm them with information they can use if questioned by customers about these kinds of reports,” says Cotter. “Individual cleaners and individual allied tradespeople simply don’t have the resources to respond and defend the industry. That’s why you need a trade association—there’s power in numbers.”