

Bill to keep drugs out of drinking water needs only Schwarzenegger's signature

by Joe Simitian
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You got well faster than expected. You bought more medicine than you needed, and now it's past the expiration date. Or you tried something and it didn't work. Those leftover medications are sitting in your medicine chest, and they're worse than just clutter. They're hazardous household waste.

Getting rid of them responsibly requires, well, let me take you to the Web site of the California State Board of Pharmacy. It instructs: Keep the medicine in the original container. Scratch the personal information off the label. Put some water in with the pills, and also add sawdust, kitty litter, scouring cleanser or a spice, such as cayenne pepper. Seal it with duct tape. Put it in a box or envelope. Throw it in the trash.

Alternatively, you can drive across town to the local household hazardous waste disposal site.

Some California residents may be so conscientious and so desperate for a way to fill time that they will follow these guidelines. For the other 99.9 percent, the sink or the toilet are within arm's reach of the medicine cabinet. Washed or flushed away, the medications will end up polluting a river, a lake or the bay.

Sitting on Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's desk is a bill to make it easier for people to do the right thing. SB 966, which I introduced, would require the Integrated Waste Management Board to develop a plan, and test it in a statewide pilot program, for conveniently disposing of unused drugs.

One obvious possibility is to require pharmacies to take them back and be responsible for their proper disposal. The state of Washington has begun such a pilot program. Maine is setting up a system to mail back unused pharmaceuticals.

Last year, in the San Francisco Bay Area, the Bay Area Pollution Prevention Group and Save the Bay organized Safe Medicine Disposal Days, setting up 39 collection points. Walgreens stores and local law enforcement participated, too.

Nearly 4,000 pounds of drugs were collected for disposal. Imagine how much could be collected by a permanent statewide system instead of local once-in-a-while events.

A collection system has to start by educating consumers. Why would anyone who's not a pharmacist or a freshwater biologist suspect any harm in flushing some outdated antibiotics away? It's just a few pills. And since they were made to be ingested, how bad could it be to send them down the drain?

The trouble is that the pharmacological soup begins to thicken when millions of medications are dumped into a sewage system that isn't designed to remove them as it cleans wastewater before putting it into rivers or the bay.

In 2002, when the U.S. Geological Survey sampled 139 streams in 30 states, it found that 80 percent had measurable concentrations of prescription and non-prescription drugs, steroids and reproductive hormones. Throwing medications into the garbage isn't much better. The active ingredients may take longer to reach the water table after leaching out of the landfill, but they get there.

Letting old medications accumulate at home is also not wise. They get taken by mistake in a middle-of-the-night sleepy grope for a pill. Or they are found by some youngster recklessly seeking a high. The solution here is simple: some sort of take-back plan.

My bill grew out of suggestions from two of my constituents in my annual "There Oughta Be a Law" contest, which asks people to propose legislation. Rebecca Kassel, at the time a 17-year-old Santa Cruz County high school student, and Mountain View resident Abe Binder were both concerned about drugs being flushed away.

"The next generation should have access to clean water, air and food," Binder said. "Whatever cheap, simple and effective measures we as citizens can come up with to protect California's water should be vigorously pursued." I agree.

Cheap, simple and effective solutions aren't near at hand for every environmental problem. When they are, as with the disposal of unused pharmaceuticals, the governor ought to grab them. The Legislature has done its part by passing SB 966. If the governor signs his name, California will be on the path to pulling one more pollutant out of our water.



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