

Toxic Wastes
In Perspective
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Perhaps the most highly publicized controversy involving toxic waste disposal is that of Love Canal, an abandoned canal in upstate New York. Hooker Chemical and Plastics used the canal as a disposal site for toxic wastes from the manufacture of chemicals as far back as 1942.

In 1953 the Niagara Falls Board of Education purchased the site from Hooker for one dollar. Ninety-eight houses and an elementary school were built near the canal, and eventually a black oily mixture oozed from the canal into the surrounding area. No one denies that the wastes were dumped into the canal or that the wastes have migrated. What is debated is the effect of the wastes on the health of the residents.

One researcher, Beverly Paigen, in a recent article in the Hastings Center Report, reported some startling statistics. She and her colleagues investigated differences between the environmental effects of wet and dry homes, wet homes being defined as those closest to streams and swamps fed by the canal. There were three times as many miscarriages in wet homes as in dry ones. Twenty per cent of the children born in wet homes had birth defects compared with 6.8% in dry homes. Residents of wet homes reported many symptoms of central nervous system poisoning, including dizziness, seizures, depression, and suicides. Admissions to mental hospitals and suicide attempts were five times greater than among residents of dry homes.

The residents of Love Canal have been fairly lenient in judging Hooker, since the waste disposal took place before much was known about potentially harmful effects. However, they have been less so with respect to the New York Department of Health, which has been very slow to act in the matter. As the article points out, the facts of the matter can easily be verified by other scientists. What is really at issue is the interpretation of the findings. Most scientists allow no more than a 5% margin of error, that is, they want to be at least 95% certain that they are correct before they assert that one thing causes another, in this case that the toxic wastes are causing health problems for the residents of Love Canal. However, when the health and lives of human beings are involved, moral considerations might dictate that we act to protect the population before all the data are in.