



A new Pennsylvania law endangers public health by forbidding health care professionals from sharing information they learn about certain chemicals and procedures used in high volume horizontal hydraulic fracturing. The procedure is commonly known as fracking.

Over the expected life time of each well, companies may use as many as nine million gallons of water and 100,000 gallons of chemicals and radioactive isotopes within a four to six week period. The additives “are used to prevent pipe corrosion, kill bacteria, and assist in forcing the water and sand down-hole to fracture the targeted formation,” explains Thomas J. Pyle, president of the Institute for Energy Research. However, about 650 of the 750 chemicals used in fracking operations are known carcinogens, according to a report filed with the U.S. House of Representatives in April 2011. Fluids used in fracking include those that are “potentially hazardous,” including volatile organic compounds, according to Christopher Portier, director of the National Center for Environmental Health, a part of the federal Centers for Disease Control. In an email to the Associated Press in January 2012, Portier noted that waste water, in addition to bring up several elements, may be radioactive. Fracking is also believed to have been the cause of hundreds of small earthquakes in Ohio and other states.

The law, an amendment to Title 52 (Oil and Gas) of the Pennsylvania Consolidated Statutes, requires that companies provide to a state-maintained registry the names of chemicals and gases used in fracking. Physicians and others who work with citizen health issues may request specific information, but the company doesn’t have to provide that information if it claims it is a trade secret or proprietary information, nor does it have to reveal how the chemicals and gases used in fracking interact with natural compounds. If a company does release information about what is used, health care professionals are bound by a non-disclosure agreement that not only forbids them from warning the community of water and air pollution that may be caused by fracking, but which also forbids them from telling their own patients what the physician believes may have led to their health problems. A strict interpretation of the law would also forbid general practitioners and family practice physicians who sign the non-disclosure agreement and learn the contents of the “trade secrets” from notifying a specialist about the chemicals or compounds, thus delaying medical treatment.

The clauses are buried on pages 98 and 99 of the 174-page bill, which was initiated and passed by the Republican-controlled General Assembly and signed into law in February by Republican Gov. Tom Corbett.

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