

# dioxindorms

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## Your right to know — and to say no.

Dear New Paltz Student or Parent:

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If you, your son or your daughter were about to walk into a health hazard, would you want to be warned? Some people might prefer not to know — but everyone has a right to know, and to make an informed decision where such matters are concerned.

On Dec. 29, 1991, four dormitories at SUNY New Paltz — Bliss, Capen, Gage and Scudder halls — were involved in an electrical disaster involving chemicals called PCBs and dioxins. Antiquated electrical equipment containing these chemicals (which were banned by congress in 1976) overheated, burned and/or exploded in the various buildings, releasing soot and toxic smog. Toxic residue from these incidents remains inside the dorms to the present day.

I have been covering these incidents and their health hazards more or less continuously since 1991, publishing in local, national and international media. The issues involved are extremely well developed and documented at the **dioxindorms.com** website.

"Toxic" in this case has a few special meanings. The chemicals at the levels found here are not necessarily acutely toxic in that they don't usually cause immediate symptoms. (Sometimes they do, however, if you are sensitive, or if your immune system is already weakened.)

Rather, effects of extremely low exposures are more often experienced in the long-term as a suppressed immune system; hormone disruption leading to diseases like endometriosis and type 2 diabetes; toxicity to unborn children (including those who may be born in the future and to subsequent generations); and promotion of cancers that may occur at some later time in life (called cancer acceleration). Furthermore, these chemicals are bioaccumulative; every dose adds to the lifetime dose, so in effect, exposure is irreversible. The chemicals picked up in one of these buildings follow a person for life.

Chemicals absorbed into the bodies of young women will be passed onto their children when they breast feed later in life. Chemicals absorbed by young men can be passed onto their children as birth defects and other grave illnesses such as childhood vaginal cancer. Exposure may lower sperm count because certain of the chemicals tend to "feminize" mammals and birds.

Should you be exposed and suffer consequences, you would unlikely ever connect your illness or child's birth defect to your time spent in the New Paltz dorms. The unfortunate results of toxic exposure are most often attributed to bad luck, but as you learn more about the situation at SUNY New Paltz, you will see that good luck has its moment, and for you, this is it.

If you call the campus, they will tell you not to worry, the buildings are safe. If you read my articles, you may decide there is more to the story. State officials feel that "a little contamination" is OK. I am saying that you have a right to decide whether that is true, and you have a right to know how incomplete the testing process was. But you can't expect someone who bears liability for the problem to tell you about the problem.

How exactly did this situation come to be?

Interior toxic releases involving PCBs and dioxin verge on impossible to clean, and are extremely expensive to deal with. From early 1992 through mid-1993, after the accidents, college administrators and state health officials rushed the four dorms back into service. Motivated mainly by the need for dormitory beds and to get the campus "back to normal," students were put back into buildings without adequate cleanup and testing (in the case of Capen and Gage, after just one month).

The four different dorms were not given the same priority for cleanup, meaning that locations that were tested and cleaned in some structures were neither tested nor cleaned in others. For example, by the time heat system contamination was found in Bliss Hall, two of the buildings (Capen and Gage) were already back in service, and their heat systems were not tested either before or after they were occupied. An additional building was then opened (Scudder) without its heat units having been tested, either.

Once the dorms were opened, the state (due to liability concerns) was in the position of never being able to admit the problem. That is where the situation stands today. In other words, state officials know that if they admit they made a "mistake," they will be sued. The obvious solution is never to admit the problem.

You will therefore be told by campus officials that the buildings are safe. They have strong incentives to lead you to believe this: they are responsible for the decisions to open the buildings and leave them open, and they are ultimately liable for their actions.

"Safe" in state terms means that toxins levels have been reduced to below the target levels set for the cleanup in the places where tests were run. What is missing from this version of the story is a discussion of internationally accepted science that shows significant, permanent effects from extremely low doses of exposure. Also missing is an honest statement of what areas were never tested at all (these are covered in the chronology).

Some dorm rooms are going to be more toxic than others. Some students will be more susceptible to the toxins than others. The risks are not distributed evenly.

As someone who knows, I feel that I have an obligation to inform you before you, or your son or daughter, makes the decision to move into Bliss, Capen, Gage or Scudder hall. More information is available in *Chronogram* magazine (reprints of my articles are available on campus) as well as on **[dioxindorms.com](http://dioxindorms.com)**. Additional information is available from people assisting me on campus today and I will do my best to be available to everyone who needs to speak with me.

How do you make your decision? Perhaps apply the precautionary principle — a stitch in time saves nine, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. When you face the imminent threat of an unknown danger, pause and consider the long-term implications. The inconvenience you experience today can save you and your family a world of pain in the future.

Very truly yours,



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