

Bend author explores chemicals and chronic illness

BY DAVID JASPER

The Bulletin

Bend resident Joanna Malaczynski was introduced to the issue of toxic chemicals in consumer products during her career as an attorney doing antitrust law and work involving toxins in products.

"I had both a knowledge of how slow and unmotivated the industries were (and) the gravity of the problem," she said. "But a lot of it was still abstract. For example, I was familiar with terms such as neurotoxin, which are chemicals that are toxic to the brain and neurological system, but I didn't really know what that meant."

Then she became sick from chemical exposure herself.

Malaczynski has written a 180-page book on the subject titled "Silent Winter: Our Chemical World and Chronic Illness." Published in March by Algora Publishing, "Silent Winter" explores the link between toxic chemicals in our environment and asthma, cancer, depression, chronic fatigue, dementia and other illnesses,

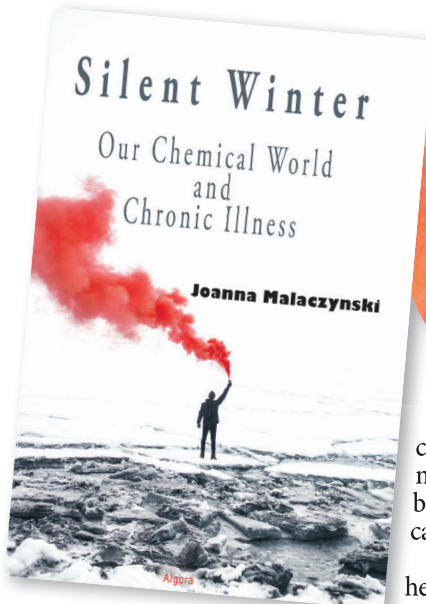
many of which are often ascribed to people's lifestyles or genes.

According to a 2016 survey published in the Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, more than 25% of people report chemical sensitivity, and 12.8% of people are formally diagnosed with multiple chemical sensitivities.

"There's definitely a substantial amount of people that are sensitive," she said. "It's a huge problem," and one that doesn't get much attention in the wider world.

An ardent swimmer, Malaczynski's chemical sensitivity was triggered by swimming in urban bodies of water, including the Willamette and Columbia rivers when she lived in Portland prior to moving to Bend in 2017.

"I've spent a lot of time swimming in ... urban waters, even though I knew that they have some issues. I just really love the water and kind of looked the other way and justified things, as we kind of all do," she said.



Submitted images

Oregon Superfund sites in the region include Portland Harbor, Scappoose Bay and Columbia Slough. The waters can have agriculture runoff, the toxic compound dioxin and polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB), a toxic, manmade chemical banned in 1979.

These long-lived chemicals can live on in silt, which can be



churned up by, say, a swimmer entering the water, or boats, whose diesel fuels can also pollute the water. Malaczynski developed headaches, exhaustion that caused her to sleep up to 16 hours a day, as well as flu symptoms.

She writes in "Silent Winter": "Flu-like symptoms resulting from chemical exposure are well-known to the industry. For example, employees who worked with toxic PFAS chemicals at DuPont referred to having the 'Teflon flu.' Fatigue, joint/muscle pain, cough and fever are known to

be caused by 'metal fume fever' in industrial workers. Occupational exposure to formaldehyde is known to induce flu-like symptoms. A flu-like epidemic has been induced in workers exposed to vinyl-based plastic fumes. The list goes on."

Doctors tested her for parasites, Lyme disease and various infections. Malaczynski found little help from conventional medicine. "It's just not a problem they understand," she said, adding that she found more efficacy in acupuncture and Chinese medicine.

"We are, all of us, exposed all the time," she said. "Sometimes we feel sick and we don't know why. ... We have so many exposures that it's hard to even tell what's going on unless you're kind of a detective and sleuth around. Microplastics, yes, are a huge problem. Some studies show that we're ingesting on average a credit card's worth on a weekly basis."

But microplastics are just one example of enduring

toxins in our environment, Malaczynski said. Long-lasting fragrances can cause congestion problems for our kidneys, liver and heart, she said.

"We're also taking in chemicals that are very persistent, meaning they're very hard to break down," she said. "The stuff in fragrance — that really strong fragrance that seems to last and last — it lasts because it's comprised of chemicals that are added to the fragrance. Those chemicals get in our bodies and are also very hard to get rid of."

Malaczynski's chemical sensitivity endures, her body unable to process toxins at the rate a healthy person's would, she said.

"They affect me much more quickly and much more profoundly," she said. "I kind of have to live in a world of avoidance."

"Silent Winter" is available directly from Algora Publishing, as well as from Amazon.com.

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Assisted living residents and staff are coming out of difficult pandemic stretch

BY SAM WILMES
APG Media

As COVID-19 restrictions are phased out, those who live and work in assisted living facilities say they are experiencing better days following a trying 15 months that have inflicted disproportionate physical and mental health challenges on their communities.

For Joe Skodje, resident of Faribault Senior Living in Faribault, Minnesota, who turned 100 in March, those impacts included the loss of in-person visits with his son.

He said it's been difficult without that usual connection and support, but as more residents have received vaccine doses and cases continue dropping, those visits have resumed, initially by appointment only, a format that has since been replaced with unlimited visits while wearing masks.

"It's great," Skodje noted of being able to see his son again following the prolonged periods of isolation.

Fellow Faribault Senior Living resident Lucy Meshke is also seeing better days. Meshke, who has a son and two daughters who sometimes visit, now goes shopping with her family, moments she cherishes.

"I really get kind of lonesome without anyone coming," she said.

For Steve Friederich, executive director of Valleyview of Owatonna in Owatonna, Minnesota, it has been good to have a more open dining following COVID-19 restrictions that necessitated meal deliveries to individual rooms. He noted the restrictions had been difficult for everyone at the facility, which specializes in helping those who are low-income and have mental health challenges. Friederich said that toll was especially felt for residents whose families played a major role in their lives. Now, Valleyview staff notice residents laughing more again and having better days. Also, there were no COVID-19 outbreaks at the facility during the pandemic.

"We are proud of our staff and of our residents," Friederich said.

Faribault Senior Living resident Sharon Cruikshank noted she is now going to restaurants and enjoys doing so without having to quarantine afterward.

"I'm glad that people can

come and visit me," she said.

Those sentiments are shared by Faribault Senior Living Director of Health Services Candice Ahlman. Both her and Executive Director Sarah Valentyn said they are already seeing physical health improving for residents who were previously declining earlier in the pandemic.

"You can see their smiles in their eyes," Ahlman said, "even behind a mask."

Senior Living staff: Remaining COVID-19 restrictions should end

Valentyn and Ahlman were forced to immediately adjust following the onset of the pandemic. Staff started wearing personal protective equipment and masks, and stringent visitor requirements were implemented to meet Minnesota Department of Health and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines. From March to May of 2020, seven residents died, a number Valentyn and Ahlman said was due to the mental toll of the pandemic and associated restrictions.

Staff also felt that stress. Some days led to feelings of anger and visible emotion due to the situation. Many residents left the facility and moved in with their families to avoid prolonged periods of isolation, and some staff left due to the toll of the pandemic. Ahlman added that some residents compared isolation, with no social activities and eating alone in their rooms, to being



Sam Wilmes/APG Media

Sharon Cruikshank, from left, Lucy Meshke and Joe Skodje are three assisted living facility residents who say the phasing out of COVID-19 restrictions is having beneficial impacts on their mental health.



Valleyview of Owatonna/Submitted

Staff and residents at Valleyview of Owatonna in Minnesota are now able to interact more with each other due to restrictions being lifted as more Americans become vaccinated and cases continue dropping.

in a prison. Many reportedly began taking depression and anxiety medications.

"They didn't want to live like that," Valentyn said. "It took an emotional roller coaster on everybody. There was a lot of anger; there was a lot of crying."

Those comments were backed by a September article in AARP. According to the article, isolation and loneliness are associated with a 50% increased chance of developing dementia, 32% spike in strokes and a nearly fourfold increased chance of death among heart

failure patients.

Even with the improved situation, however, Ahlman said residents are still expressing frustration. They were excited to be vaccinated to protect themselves against the disease and not have to wear face masks anymore. Yet they still must do so within the facility in most circumstances when outside of their rooms to comply with sometimes contradicting MDH and CDC guidelines — even though masking requirements have been eliminated in many other settings.

Valentyn wants the mask mandate to end for residents and for staff to no longer need to wear goggles and masks.

Ahlman and Valentyn say the mental toll the pandemic and associated restrictions placed on residents leave them with mixed feelings on whether the state and federal restrictions had a positive net impact on people who were living in assisted living facilities. To Ahlman, the restrictions were worth it from a nursing standpoint to prevent COVID-19 outbreaks but didn't need to last as long as they have. She did not support the banning of visitors to assisted living facilities. To her, as someone tasked with ensuring patient rights, the decision to ban visits stripped human rights from residents who had earned the right to have a say in their lives.

To Valentyn, state and federal guidelines could have been "looser" and taken further into account the need for residents to socialize.

"That socialization piece of it for me was really hard to accept," she said. "And the depression that I saw — the residents moving out and people passing away just from depression."

Dissipating anxiety

Restrictions began lifting at Faribault Senior Living in January. The dining room was opened once again early this year, and residents restarted activities while wearing masks. The final round of vaccinations for residents came in March. Since then, guidelines have loosened to allow residents to participate in activities away from campus without having to quarantine for two weeks. In one instance, a resident was able to see her great-grandchild, a four-generation photo made possible by the loosening of restrictions.

Now, even residents who are initially hesitant to leave the facility feel more comfortable. The frustration some residents and families initially shared over COVID-19 restrictions has dissipated. Ahlman noted the facility has received letters, emails and personal thank-yous from residents on protecting them during the pandemic. Faribault Senior Living LLC has reportedly not lost any residents to COVID-19 and only had a few cases.

"You can see that ... anxiety of, 'I might lose my life if I leave,' has definitely diminished," Ahlman said.