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Erin Brockovich Ellis
Environmental Crusader

**Healthy Veins
Happy Legs**

End Dry Mouth

Life's First Food

**Evolution
of a Supplement**

**Cancer Therapy
CHOICES**

Toxicity at Home



Erin Brockovich Making a Difference

by Parris M. Kidd, Ph.D. and Lyle Hurd, editor *totalhealth*



Roman Salicki Photography

The real Erin Brockovich is more engaging, intelligent and visionary than the personality portrayed by Hollywood. She gained fame as the law office file clerk whose solo investigation established that the health of countless people who lived in and around Hinckley, California had been devastated by exposure to toxic chromium 6 (hexavalent chromium) coming from a compressor plant owned by the huge electric utility PG&E (Pacific Gas and Electric). In 1996, thanks to the persistent efforts of Erin and Ed Masry, PG&E was ordered to make the largest legal settlement in U.S. history, paying out some \$333 million to more than 600 Hinckley residents. Currently Erin Brockovich Ellis serves as director of Environmental Research at the Masry and Vititoe law firm. Here she is interviewed by Lyle Hurd, *totalhealth* editor (LH) and Dr. Parris Kidd, *totalhealth's* science editor (PK).

PK: Thanks for taking the time to talk with us. What are you mainly doing these days?

EBE: I've been doing a lot of lecture tours, speaking to a lot of groups and I've been pleasantly surprised by the positive reactions I've been getting around the country. Out of this I've written my first book, *Take It From Me, Life's a Struggle But You Can Win*, which will be out in December.

I've been asked if I am an environmentalist. Some people think of environmental activists as tree huggers, willing to bring a

whole corporation down over a single drop of oil. That isn't what this is about. This is about corporate America and industry who are getting away with dumping and poisoning, dumping tons and tons and millions and millions of gallons of contaminants. And they aren't just polluting Hinckley and other towns in California: this is a problem globally. We need to address this problem or we're going to be very, very sorry, sooner than some people believe. So I want to clarify for the population that environmentalists are activists on an issue that's extremely important.

I'm trying to figure out ways to help a great portion of the population to understand the significance of the problem, to educate people further, to create more public awareness. Corporate America has the manpower, the technology and the money to clean up the mess they've made. I think they need to step up to the plate and be held accountable and take their share of the responsibility for what Big Business has done to the environment.

PK: How bad do you think it is in the U.S. from a health point of view?

EBE: Frankly, I'm extremely concerned. We knew that when the movie came out there would be a lot of response but we hadn't anticipated what we got. Within the first 30 days after the movie was released we had 100,000 hits on our Web site. A year after the movie was released we are still channeling hundreds of e-mails, phone calls and letters per week on toxic cases globally. I have had a real education this past year on looking at this much higher incidence of cancer and other illnesses throughout this country, not to mention the rest of the world. And I don't know that we are genetically coded to get cancer this way. I think that there is a common denominator (to cancers). There is no doubt in my mind, whatsoever, that pollution is correlated to people's cancers and other illnesses.

PK: The scientific data are there. Dr. Samuel Epstein and many other experts have been relating pollutants to cancer and other life-threatening diseases for three decades now.

EBE: Sure they have. And what happens in a court of law—this is one of the things I get really frustrated about—these big corporations can hire basically any medical source they want, to say what the corporations want them to say. Our side has to get over a causation issue, that whatever chemical we are dealing with can in fact be correlated with the illnesses that we've seen in the communi-

ty. We've been blasted with accusations of using junk science.

We've been drawn into debates on chromium 6, with the other side asserting that it can't cause harm at this or that exposure level, that you can be exposed to this level for eight hours, as an example. We have a population that was exposed not only by ingestion but by inhalation. There are experts claiming that chromium 6 can't hurt you by ingestion, yet there is scientific data constantly telling them to re-address this issue. People who accidentally ingest chromium 6 can die. Chromium 6 is a poison and shouldn't be in our water. People understand rat poison in the water is a bad thing but we're supposed to accept chromium 6 in our water. The experts set standards for exposure based on a healthy adult male, but any contaminant will have different effects on a child, an elderly person or a pregnant woman. We need to change those standards, because each one of us is an individual. My son can get stung by a bee once and go into a coma, but my daughter can get stung 10 times and it won't hurt her.

LH: In this scenario they're also supposing that these toxins are not synergistic? A certain threshold for chromium 6 alone can differ from chromium 6 together with other pollutants, right?

EBE: They set different standards for allowable levels for different chemicals, all based on single-exposure data.

PK: Scientifically there's an overwhelming body of data indicating that thresholds and tolerance levels are totally arbitrary.

EBE: I believe these exposure standards are put in place to protect the corporations. They're not in place to protect the people.

PK: That's saying it! So if you were to become President of the United States, or when you become President (she laughs), what are some early moves that you would want to make? If you had the power to change things from the top, where would you start?

EBE: For me, when I see a corporation that knows they have a contamination problem, a product or by-product that people are being exposed to, and they make a decision to do nothing about it and people die, I call them no less than a murderer. In this country, when we know somebody kills somebody, what is their sentence? What would happen

to these big polluters if they were made to be held criminally responsible? It suddenly becomes their butt on the line. It suddenly becomes personal. It becomes real: "Wait a minute . . . before I make a decision like this,

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to destroy a family, what's going to happen to me if I get caught? That would destroy my family." That starts scaring them then—especially for a big corporate executive going to prison that is the last thing they want to do. So I would look at making corporate polluters criminally responsible for their acts.

Next, on both the federal and state levels I would give our programs in the EPA and state agencies a lot more authority and a much bigger budget. What happens on a state level, for example in Hinckley, California, is that you have the regional water quality board overseeing a contaminated site. They do not have the manpower nor the funding to rely on in order to do their own testing. Often the only thing they can utilize is the corporation's consultant reports. I have seen time and time again, tainted reports. And I think that these agencies need to have the authority and the budget to go out there and start putting the heat on them. In the instance of Hinckley, do you know that not one time was PG&E ever fined for violating state of California ground water regulations continually. Not once. I would really beef up and give credence to these agencies. Their hands are tied.

PK: Do you think these agencies want to

police better?

EBE: I think they want to. I don't think these people sit at their desks and maliciously make decisions to harm citizens. But they have no authority, no funding, to go out there and do their jobs. For example, we have a chromium 6 problem in the Los Angeles, California area. The regional water quality control board is looking at 410 potential sites that could have released toxic chromium. They don't have the man-

because now these people know, they have knowledge. And the next time something, a little glop of something, shows up they don't just toss it off and think of it as some little flu bug. They have it looked at. The cure to cancer could be early detection and they can't do that if they're not educated.

PK: What do you think of Greenpeace's call for zero tolerance for toxic chemicals?

EBE: I don't take any issue with that. I don't want to be exposed to chromium 6 at

inspection before the home is purchased, just like there is for asbestos?

EBE: I would like to see that happen and there is legislation in progress. I became educated around the problem with my own home. I'm not a contractor and I think we should have more inspections. The EPA says that for nine years they've been trying to get the state to accept that molds are a public health hazard. So again, it's about educating people.

LH: Unless somebody evidences obvious symptoms, how do you check to see if there's mold in the home?

EBE: I thought at first that I had some type of flu. After months went by and I wasn't getting any better, I started going to my doctor. My white count had dropped, I was so chronically fatigued that I can't begin to explain it to you. I could not get up and nothing could motivate me. I had respiratory problems and my doctor kept asking me had I been re-exposed to something, like out in a field. Then one day I slipped and cut my foot walking through the dining room. Then I realized the wood floors were warped. I brought out inspectors and one step led to another. There turned out to be all sorts of awful little mold bugs in the home. I'm again educating myself. You have to be educated on an individual level so you can start protecting yourself and your family.

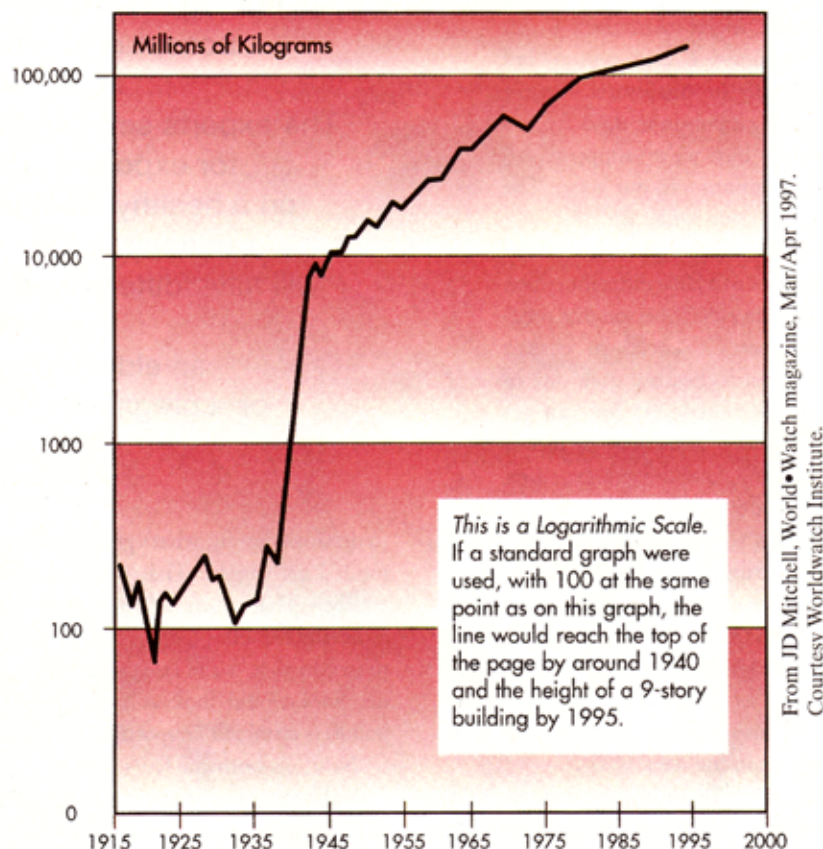
PK: We believe that there has to be change at every level from the individual to the highest societal levels, for there to be real change. Are you involved in that huge lawsuit at Lake Tahoe over MTBE pollution? (MTBE is methyl tertiary butyl ether, used as a gasoline additive in California.)

EBE: We got called in on that. The MTBE problem all boils down to big industry and what they knew. It's all over the water table in California. I don't think people realize how precious our natural ground water sources are—our grandchildren may have to be dealing with this when they are grown. I think with all the cancer cases these days we're seeing the effects—maybe just the beginning of the effects—of the past 30 years of contamination with these kinds of toxic substances.

PK: There's a lot of good science to support that. What about the reproductive and developmental toxins? The ones that can be passed on through parents to their children.

EBE: I've seen this first-hand in DBCP, which is clearly scientifically shown to make men sterile. (DBCP is dibromo-

World Production of Synthetic Organic Chemicals



power or the funding to get out there to every one of those sites. I would start giving greater authority to these agencies so they could start making a difference.

PK: What about education of the public? What about the CDC (Centers for Disease Control) or other public health people doing more to educate citizens?

EBE: Oh, I think that's critical. Because that's what's happened in a lot of our toxic cases: people became educated. Nobody initially had any idea that they had been exposed to chromium 6. And to take them tangible documents, tangible information and sit down with them and take the time to explain to them what's going on, you create such power within the individual,

any level. I think what Greenpeace is asking for is that we are supposed to be so advanced . . . big, massive corporations doing billions of billions of dollars in business, why can't they build, do what they need to do, without continuing to contaminate? They need to take some of the big dollars they are making and spend some to ensure that they are keeping the ground water clean and that they're protecting the very people that make their businesses run. I could talk about this all day long.

PK: Now to this topic of mold contamination of your home. How does a family like yours achieve early detection of that sort of contamination? Should there be a routine

chloropropane.) Unfortunately, in a court of law we've been unable to prove causation so far. Again, here you have experts who aren't cheap and the corporations do not operate on a moralistic standpoint as good and decent

would have been worth everything because it would have saved all of those lives. You can't put a dollar figure on how some of these people suffer today. It's cruel. And you know what, money doesn't help you when you're

oversight committee, set up with a budget of \$100–500 million to be a watchdog over the government and industry.

Maybe that would have to happen to get industry to change.

EBE: Portions of profits should go into funds to the state for these agencies to get in, find the problem, clean it up and protect our communities . . .

PK: An environmental tax on industry?

EBE: . . . Proposition 65 . . . in the state of California was a voter initiative. These big corporations were to be fined for violating limits on contaminants that they can or cannot release from their sites. Yet who's enforcing this?

They're still getting away with illegal industrial discharges. There need to be further initiatives with bigger teeth for overseeing water purveyors and water agencies, which currently are only testing the water supplies on a quarterly basis. A pollutant could run through and clear the test site during that three-month period and not be detected. Again, these lax rules are in place to protect industry and not protect the population.

PK: Radical. What about the physicians? Do you think they are trained to recognize and respond appropriately?

EBE: No. In a lot of our cases people are still going to their family doctors of 20 years. A lot of this data is new and doctors are not up-to-date on it. I have been seeing a lot of changes at the universities, though. Students really want to get involved, have really taken an interest in the environment. Professors want to bring in more environmental social justice-type classes and programs. There are some good things happening but the industry mentality cannot be changed overnight. We have some work ahead of us but I think we've taken that first step in creating public awareness.

PK: Certainly your contributions are just incredible in that area and all of us should be grateful to you.

EBE: Well, you know, I am not a scientist, I'm not an expert, I'm not an attorney, I'm not a doctor. I don't have to be any one of those to understand and be compassionate for another human being. And that's all I did in Hinckley. People were suffering and I wanted to know why.

PK: We think you're doing fantastic work and I hope that at sometime we can all work together on a project.

LH: It's been a pleasure to work with you.

EBE: Thanks for the work you're doing with your magazine. ♦

This is about corporate America and industry who are getting away with dumping and poisoning, dumping tons and tons and millions and millions of gallons of contaminants.

human beings. They're coming from the dollar figure. These big corporations and their experts, if any one of them at an individual level had a spouse or they themselves or their child go through what they have put people through, it might be a different scenario.

PK: So there's a need for honest and competent experts to step forward and take principled positions based on what they know. Do you think that expert witnesses should be penalized for lying?

EBE: I think they should, because when it's all said and done, your honor and what you've left behind as a legacy and doing right by another human being is really all you have. On a real moralistic level, people need to have conversations with themselves and take a look at what they're doing. And those scientists up there as expert witnesses, I hold them to the same high standards that they would expect from another expert testifying about their own child. They'll take the money, sit there as an expert, knowing that a contaminant at x, y and z level can in fact harm you, yet they sit there and tell the court it won't. That is wrong.

We still need a study of the health effects of chromium 6 in the field. For the first time you have more than an animal population—you have a human population exposed to chromium 6—yet no one comes to study them.

PK: That really disappoints me about my fellow scientists. Do you feel, speaking also as a Californian energy consumer, that PG&E's corporate irresponsibility about pollution may be related to the energy crisis?

EBE: I don't understand PG&E and its officers and their corporate mentality and how they run their company. I think they've got egos and greed beyond anything that I can comprehend. Back in the '60s, if they had spent the money to stop the chromium 6 releases, to clean up that area and move to a different type of technology, it would have been worth the \$333 million they just had to shell out. It

sick. Hopefully it can get you the proper medical care, but for many of these people it's gone beyond that. If you don't feel well enough to get up for the day and enjoy the laugh of your child, then what's it worth. You ask somebody, I'll give you \$10 million but you're going to die in three years and see what they say.

PK: So the money really has to go into prevention and stopping this holocaust of pollution toxicity in the first place, before it happens.

EBE: Sure. And the reason PG&E got into this in the first place is that they didn't want to spend the money.

LH: Your detective work has inspired Americans to look more deeply at things that shouldn't be allowed, for instance. Our new administration doesn't seem to be concerned about arsenic in drinking water. It appears there should be some advocacy organization that is completely independent of both industry and government.

EBE: I'm seeing it happen out there. We always have one or two community members who've figured out how to get into that water quality board and make a difference. The agencies need funding, need scientists, to make their own tests and have the power to enforce big-time penalties. EPA, which is supposed to be our watchdog, does not have that authority or funding to get out there and protect its citizens.

I'm beginning to think corporate mentalities and political leaders have taken on the slogan "Ignorance is bliss." They ignore, they deny and they don't do anything to create a solution. I believe in the power of individuals and of us as people to act collectively. I saw it happen at Hinckley; I'm going to see it happen on all these other toxic cases we're working on. I don't think that we should idly sit by any more and think Big Brother is watching out for us, 'cause I don't think he is.

LH: You're probably the best person in the U.S. right now to call for the funding of an