

Note: This was the Opinion column on the Editorial and Opinion page of the (Adrian, MI) Daily Telegram of Sunday, 29 June 2009.

Keep looking for brighter ideas

Better ways usually exist and, with some illumination from Adrian's Jerry Straub, hopefully we'll find them.

Back in 2007, a Telegram story highlighted Straub, a retired engineer who in 2006 suddenly became disoriented, prone to falling and unable to function. He eventually determined the cause was compact fluorescent lights (CFLs), the coiled white bulbs touted as a huge environmental advance. Straub doesn't dispute their cost advantages, but his own pursuit of the subject is uncovering fresh worldwide health problems with the bulbs once touted as a global solution.

Compared with traditional incandescent light bulbs, CFLs have some economic and environmental advantages, and the Telegram has editorialized in favor of switching to them.

There were concerns from the start. CFLs don't work in all outlets, they burn out faster when used outdoors in the cold and they take longer to reach full brightness, which can be a drawback in areas such as closets or bathrooms. CFLs contain small amounts of toxic mercury. Although all CFLs combined contain less mercury than power plants emit, the burden of cleaning up broken CFLs in a safe manner falls to individual consumers. Also, CFLs cost several times more to purchase than conventional bulbs.

That's part of the reason Congress decided to ban traditional bulbs as an option by 2014 under the Clean Energy Act passed two years ago. It basically will eliminate selling most incandescent bulbs between 40 and 150 watts. Some countries are speeding up that schedule. Most incandescent bulbs will be prohibited in Australia by 2010, and England and the rest of the United Kingdom has a 2011 phase-out set. Fidel Castro and Hugo Chavez, however, are the world-class restrictors. Cuba banned its citizens from using traditional bulbs in 2005, and Venezuela followed shortly after.

But backlash against the new regula-



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Opinion

tions has started. In England, some stores are defying government plans to start a "voluntary phase out" of 100 watt light bulbs. Last December, New Zealand switched off its proposed ban that would have begun in October.

Why the backlash? In part, it's from groups with medical conditions they believe are aggravated by CFLs.

■ Unlike traditional lights, CFLs produce fluorescent light in tens of thousands of flashing bursts per second. That's a concern for people with migraines or epilepsy, for which flashing light can be a seizure trigger. (Even Nintendo Wii game manuals contain a health warning about the problems of flashing images and lights.)

■ A group in the United Kingdom, Right to Light, objects to the incandescent ban by pointing to skin ailments, including skin cancer, associated with UV radiation from fluorescent lights.

■ CFLs (along with cell phones and other electronic devices) have been shown to produce electromagnetic interference (EMI) as well as radio frequency interference (RFI) — well known to garage door manufacturers as causing problems. Recent scientific studies raise health concerns about the effects of EMI and RFI, sometimes referred to as "dirty electricity."

■ Electromagnetic hypersensitivity has been shown to cause a variety of symptoms including dizziness, a pins-and-needles sensation, fatigue and headaches, according to a paper by Dr. Andrew Goldsworthy, a lecturer in biol-

ogy at the University of London's Imperial College.

■ A report by Dr. Magda Havas of Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario, noted that CFLs produced by General Electric (and probably others) produce EMI in the Intermediate Frequency radio band. The World Health Organization has found IF to have "adverse health effects."

■ One study of cancer in a California school found that teachers in classrooms with particularly high levels of RFI were five times more likely to be at a risk of developing cancer.

■ Also, Dr. Kenneth Ciuffreda of State University of New York has issued a report showing that critical flicker has significant impact on people with traumatic brain injury who also are sensitive to light and motion.

Fortunately, a newer type of light bulb using light emitting diodes (LEDs) is now on the market. They're more expensive than CFLs, though, and don't have the political clout of the large corporations that manufacture CFLs.

Straub, though, says the government should skip its scheduled incandescent ban in consideration of CFLs' effect on people like himself disabled by them. **He believes the number is similar to people confined in wheelchairs.**

"We make accommodations for them, and we should. We also should make accommodations for people being hurt by CFLs," he said. "I don't want to die. Just stop the CFL bulbs."

The rush to find new answers is important. The world faces population growth, hunger, disease, pollution, non-renewable resources and a host of other problems. However, as Straub's ongoing case shows, the rush to ban proven technologies may not be such a bright idea.

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