

Covid-19 and the environment – world leaders must listen to the science of plastic

SIR,

Trashing the environment won't solve the COVID-19 crisis. But across the world industry is using the pandemic as a cover story to block urgently needed legislation to protect people and planet.

Last month the Plastics Industry Association President asked US Secretary of Health Alex Azar to reverse the plastic bag bans passed by states including New York and California. The industry group alleged that single-use plastics represent the “safest choice” during a virus outbreak.ⁱ

This is contrary to a wealth of evidence supporting the plastic bag bans. In March a study published in the New England Journal of Medicine revealed that COVID-19 can remain infectious on plastic for some two or three days, compared to a day or less on cardboard, cloth or woodⁱⁱ Plastic, therefore, increases the risk of viral exposure.

Even more: a growing body of evidence raises serious concerns about plastic and its links to ill-health. Research published in the Netherlands last year revealed human contact with microplastics may compromise the human immune system.ⁱⁱⁱ

As the world rushes to deal with the worst pandemic for generations, corporate lobbyists are using public anxiety about COVID-19 to promote their business agenda. Ceding to their demands risks further prolonging the exposure of some of the world's most vulnerable people to the effects of crises like climate change and plastic pollution.

Only a rigid adherence to the best available science will see mankind overcome COVID-19. Now more than ever before world leaders must employ the same cool hard logic when it comes to protecting the environment from some of the worst excesses of big business.

We should all listen to the science of plastic.

ⁱ Memo dated 18 March from Plastics Industry Association President Tony Radoszewski to Secretary of Health Alex Azar attached.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMc2004973>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.plasticsoupfoundation.org/en/2019/10/does-plastic-make-us-sick-contact-withmicroplasticsmay-lead-to-immune-cell-death/>