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## Opinion

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# My rich town was poisoned by a corporation. Even the 1% isn't safe from pollution

*Chantal Panozzo*

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**M**y son took his first breath in a place I never imagined would be potentially harmful for his health: Hinsdale, Illinois.

Hinsdale is listed in the top 1% of the wealthiest towns in Illinois. It's filled with multimillion-dollar mansions, Zook architectural masterpieces and upscale shops. But Hinsdale, despite its privileged position in Chicago's western suburbs, has one unfortunate thing against it: like any other American town, it's part of a country whose environmental and political leaders have decided that the environment is worth compromising for private

profit.

Somehow, many of the privileged among us, including myself, didn't think the unfortunate choices of our political leaders could have the [power to kill us](#). They might hurt the poor in Flint, Michigan, the migrant workers in Bakersfield, California, or those who don't have the means to leave Louisiana's Cancer Alley. But most of us living in Hinsdale and its neighboring well-to-do towns never considered that our villages could be a Flint or Cancer Alley.

We were naive. Last year we [learned](#) that Sterigenics, a global medical sterilization company with a plant in Willowbrook, Illinois, quietly spewed insane amounts of ethylene oxide (EtO), a powerful carcinogen, into our air for 35 years.

But that's not the worst of it. When the news of this poisoning finally broke - and we realized that Sterigenics had brought our community a long-term cancer risk [10 times higher than federal EPA standards](#), possibly the [second highest rate](#) of cancer in the US - we stupidly assumed something would be done about it immediately.

This was wishful thinking. Nothing was done. So enraged residents formed Stop Sterigenics, a group that is now over 10,000 members strong. We staged protests, packed town hall meetings, signed witness slips and called for Illinois politicians to shut down the company for the sake of public health.

But progress was slow - because, unbelievable as it may sound, Sterigenics was operating legally. The Chicago Tribune [quoted](#) the then governor, Bruce Rauner, who claimed: "This is not an emergency. My understanding is that particular company has followed all the regulations and the proper procedures." (Maybe it wasn't an emergency to Mr Rauner since his old investment firm [co-owned Sterigenics](#).)

In February, the Illinois environmental protection agency [issued](#) a seal order temporarily banning Sterigenics from using EtO, but last month, the agency granted the company a permit to continue to use the chemical. The message to all of us was clear: the rights of Sterigenics to make a profit mattered more to the IEPA than the rights of thousands of people living in its vicinity not to be subjected to cancer-causing air. This really shouldn't have been surprising to

anyone reading the news, where every day there seems to be another disaster related to an environmental policy decision, but, until it happens to you, it is.

Just as we were preparing to breathe toxic air again, the unthinkable happened: despite being given the green light to continue using EtO (albeit with certain emissions restrictions in place), Sterigenics announced it was leaving Willowbrook. They blamed their lease and the “unpredictable” regulatory landscape rather than the community activism that has fought them relentlessly for 14 months. But the question to the rest of the nation is: where are they going? They emit EtO in [eight other locations nationwide](#), and the Environmental Protection Agency’s National Air Toxics Assessment has [linked](#) EtO to high cancer rates in Smyrna, Georgia, where Sterigenics also has a plant.

So while our communities are celebrating, we’re also still fighting. Because at the end of October, the Illinois general assembly’s fall veto session is voting on [house bill 3888](#), which, if approved, would phase out ethylene oxide emissions from all sterilization facilities statewide by 2021.

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If the bills pass, this is great for the people of Illinois - but not great for the people in the rest of the country, if Illinois’s [25 other EtO-emitting companies](#) simply move to their states instead. So to anyone who thinks they’re too privileged to be subjected to pollution: here’s what I now know: even in today’s ever-greedier America, money doesn’t always save you. The air, for one thing, doesn’t care if you’re a millionaire - or a billionaire. Air is there, ready for you to take your next breath, whether you’re in a mansion or a mobile home.

So if we pollute our environment by allowing Obama-era coal rules to be rolled back, by allowing seismic air gun blasts, by drilling in the Arctic or by allowing the EPA to disband air pollution review panels (all of which have been allowed by the current administration in the last year), then we’re all going to suffer, whether we’re wealthy or poor, Democrat

or Republican.

In the last year, Trump has laid off EPA staff, [rolled back](#) nearly 80 environmental regulations and sided with powerful industries in setting policies toward our air and water. Whether or not the many people [currently suing Sterigenics for their cancers win](#) we’re all potentially losing. Just by having an American address and living in a

sterigenics for their careers will, we're all potentially losing. Just by having an American address, and living in a country where corporate interests take precedence over our own citizens' safety.

But the tough community activism of Stop Sterigenics proves that even in a world where the EPA protects corporations instead of people, people still do have power. Let's use it to join the attorneys general of Illinois, California, Connecticut, Delaware, the District of Columbia, Iowa, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Rhode Island, Vermont, Virginia and Wisconsin, who, on 10 October, [wrote](#) a letter asking the EPA to update its current emissions standards to protect the nation from the EtO the EPA knows is killing us.

If we don't, where will we go in America that's not in danger of being compromised? Nowhere. The realities of my experience prove it.

Chantal Panozzo is an anti-pollution activist and a member of Stop Sterigenics

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