

# Free online access to millions of documents on chemical toxicity

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Millions of pages of internal corporate and trade association documents relating to the introduction of new products and chemicals into the workplace and commerce have been compiled into a free searchable online database called ToxicDocs. The history and future outlook for this database is now the subject of a free to view special section in the *Journal of Public Health Policy* which is a Palgrave Macmillan journal and is published by Springer Nature.

Historians of public health, Gerald Markowitz and David Rosner, first became interested in documenting the history of toxic agents in the 1980s. Their career has since seen them investigate thousands of documents on issues such as lead poisoning in children, the carcinogenic properties of vinyl chloride, silicosis, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), and asbestos.

Over the years they have gained access to, analyzed, and categorized millions of pages of documents, many of which have contributed to lawsuits against the chemical industry. Collecting so many documents has been both a blessing and a curse. While they opened up new sources and interesting questions about corporate history, searching through these documents by hand became a physical challenge.

Then in the early 2000s, Merlin Chowkwanyun had the idea to put the collections of documents online in a searchable format to make them available to students, scholars, and others interested in environmental and occupational health issues. The idea finally kicked into full gear a

couple years ago. What emerged was the online database ToxicDocs.

The special section "ToxicDocs: Opening a new era of evidence for policies to protect public [health](#)" provides a valuable overview of the significance of this database. In addition to a special editorial on the history of ToxicDocs, there are seven commentaries addressing the potential impact and use for the database.

As industrializing countries strive to avoid the mistakes of others, ToxicDocs will remain a resource free and open to all, anywhere in the world: investigative journalists, toxicologists, policy-makers, historians of [public health](#), environmental justice advocates, and the general public.

**More information:** David Rosner et al, ToxicDocs ([www.ToxicDocs.org](http://www.ToxicDocs.org)): from history buried in stacks of paper to open, searchable archives online, *Journal of Public Health Policy* (2018). [DOI: 10.1057/s41271-017-0106-8](https://doi.org/10.1057/s41271-017-0106-8)

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