

Nano World: Public attitudes toward nano

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When it comes to nanotechnology, the U.S. public apparently looks forward most to advanced medical applications that save lives and improved consumer goods that enhance quality of life, experts told UPI's Nano World.

At the same time, the U.S. public has low trust in government and industry regarding the health risks of nanotechnology, according to a new study on public attitudes toward nanotechnology from the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars at the Smithsonian in Washington.

"Thorough pre-market product safety testing was a key way people wanted government and industry to act to improve trust," said researcher Jane Macoubrie, a social scientist and a senior adviser at the center.

"Numerous named examples ranging from Vioxx to dioxin have created a widespread perception that industry pushes new products to market without adequate safety testing, and people feel industry too often has put its own interests ahead of consumer safety."

Macoubrie interviewed 177 volunteers from Washington state, Texas and Ohio in May and June. They were given information packets to explain potential applications for emerging nanotechnologies.

"There is concern about studies that include a step where they provide the participants with materials and then test them afterward. If I was sly enough, if someone asked me to produce a given set of results, it could be possible to design a text to do that," David Berube, research director

of NanoScience and Technology Studies at the University of South Carolina in Columbia, cautioned to UPI's Nano World.

Only 11 percent felt voluntary standards, which have been a key part of government and industry discussions about nanotechnology oversight so far, would be adequate. Instead, 55 percent said government oversight beyond voluntary standards is needed to manage any possible health and environmental risks.

"The agencies they expressed the greatest concerns over were the FDA, followed by the USDA, followed by OSHA," Macoubrie said. "It's all about health, health, health.

"If the American public doesn't have a high level of trust in medical applications of nanotechnology, how can we expect a global market to?" she added.

Still, while organizations such as the ETC Group in Ottawa have called for a ban on nanotechnology until more is known about it, 76 percent of those interviewed believed that would be overreacting.

"They weren't terrified of nanotechnology. They just want proper precautions taken. They talk actively about how if this is a global international trend of research, that U.S. industry must be competitive and not be left behind," Macoubrie told Nano World. "They can see the potential in it. They hope it will result in more jobs. They hope they will be educated and trained so they can have those jobs."

To increase public trust in nanotechnologies, 71 percent of participants wanted increased safety tests before products go to market. Next on the list was supplying more information to make informed consumer decisions.

"I really think it's valuable to get people's impressions early on, so this is great," Susanna Priest, a mass communication scholar specializing in science communication at the University of South Carolina, told Nano World. "But while people said they were positive about nanotechnology, people don't know a lot about it. So when you're getting what people expect from nanotech, you're largely getting a reflection of social values in general. People are interested in health benefits for any new technology that comes along that could promise health benefits."

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