BLADE

TOLEDO, OH
TUESDAY 147,312
MAY 11 1999

Ignore the pesticide scare du jour

BY ANGELA LOGOMASINI

"Public advocate" reports on the supposed dire consequences of pesticide use seem to come out almost daily. According to news reports and environmentalist "studies," if pesticides don't kill you, they are sure to get your children. But with these claims circulating, what are health-conscious consumers to do? Provide yourself and your children with a healthy diet — rich in fruits and veggies — and ignore the scare du jour.

These self-selected "consumer advocates" say that a 1993 National Academy of Sciences study justifies their alarming claims because the study shows that children are at great risk. Yet the study, "Pesticides in the Diets of Infants and Children," did not conclude that existing exposures were unsafe for children.

The study notes that "exposures occurring earlier in life can lead to greater or lower risk of chronic toxic effects such as cancer than exposures occurring later in life." To be safe, the report recommended that the EPA employ a 10-fold safety factor when setting pesticide regulation, which Congress wrote into its revision of the pesticide law in 1996.

Yet the debate continues, and scientists at the EPA question whether the new law makes any sense. At a meeting of the Society of Toxicology, EPA scientists noted that the law is not science driven, and that scientists lack human surveillance data necessary to adequately assess risks to children.

But anti-pesticide crusaders don't advertise these facts or that other studies — including NAS studies — conclude that current pesticide levels are safe. In 1996, a NAS-released report, "Carcinogens and Anti-Carcinogens in the Human Diet," noted that "The great majority of individual naturally occurring and synthetic chemicals in the diet appear to be present at levels below which any significant adverse biological effect is likely, and so low that they are unlikely to pose any appreciable cancer risk."

It's not surprising that risks are so small. Even before Congress made the law more stringent, the EPA used exceedingly conservative risk estimates, usually employing a 100-fold safety factor. Frank Cross, professor of business regulation at the University of Texas, cites various studies showing that the EPA overstates pesticide exposure by as much as 99,000 to 463,000 times actual exposure levels.

A key reason EPA risk assessments are way off the mark is because bureaucrats assume that farmers apply the full legal limit of all pesticides licensed for use on a given crop. Yet farmers apply only a fraction of the legal limits and don't apply all pesticides licensed for a particular crop.

For example, Mr. Cross notes that one study shows that farmers in California use about 25 per cent of their legal limit for tomatoes, and each farmer uses no more than five out of 54 licensed pesticide products.

Given these realities, one rarely finds cases where produce contains the amount of pesticides that the EPA considers safe.

In a letter to the Wall Street Journal, a Consumer Union activist notes that they've found cases where pesticides exceeded what the EPA considers acceptable by 30 times. But given that the EPA builds safety factors thousands of times beyond what is safe and assumes a daily exposure of that rate for 70 years, these rare, one-time occurrences don't represent serious risks.

Rather than raising red flags, activists would do a greater service by simply advising consumers to wash produce. One study shows that washing fruits and vegetables can reduce exposure by 97 per cent.

Still, anti-pesticide activists suggest that synthetic pesticides are somehow innately evil and that we should switch to natural alternatives. Just recently, the New York Times reported that such natural alternatives may be on the way. Government scientists have discovered that a naturally occurring substance found on peaches produces self-protection against pests.

But this case simply shows the silliness of such blind-sighted trusts in "natural is better" mantra. That's because nature's cure for the pest problem isn't necessarily any safer than synthetic pesticides. In this case, the natural alternative found on peaches is benzaldehyde. But if you apply the same standards to benzaldehyde that we apply to other pesticides, it wouldn't pass muster.

In "Carcinogens and Anti-Carcinogens in the Human Diet," benzaldehyde is listed as a rodent carcinogen — a label what when attached to synthetic pesticides triggers mountains of regulations and anti-pesticide scare campaigns. The "rodent carcinogen" label simply means that this substance causes cancer in rodents when administered in extremely high doses.

The fact that natural or synthetic chemicals cause cancer when administered to rodents in large doses tell us little about low-level exposures to humans. For example, according to the NAS study, benzaldehyde is found in 40 fruits and vegetables among other things.

Despite rodent tests, the NAS does not fear that this substance causes a problem. On the contrary, they note that consumption of large amounts of fruits and vegetables is our best defense against cancer, and neither synthetic nor natural chemicals in our diets pose much risk at current levels.

Besides, obsessing about synthetic chemicals makes little sense given that 99.9 per cent of the chemicals we consume are naturally occurring.

If anti-pesticide activists are truly interested in public health, they should advocate policies that ensure affordable produce, which will lead to higher consumption and give people a better defense against cancer.

Yet scare campaigns deter fruit and vegetable consumption. And subsequent misguided laws and regulations lower crop yields and increase prices.

Facing higher prices, people can't afford to eat as much produce. The resulting drop in produce consumption means that we could see an increase in cancer rates, thanks to the so-called consumer advocates.

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