

Medical Community Takes a Stand on Pesticides

In the last month, we have seen an important development as the medical community takes a stand on pesticides. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), in the December issue of its journal *Pediatrics*, published a policy statement and technical report with a warning on pesticides. About the same time, Kaiser Permanente, the nation's largest health care plan, issued a piece in its newsletter, *Partners in Health*, that warns people about genetically engineered corn in their diet. It is critical to engage the medical community in both defining the hazards *and* the solutions. That's why AAP's focus on alternatives to pesticides in its recent policy statement, *Pesticide Exposure in Children*, and in another journal piece it published a month earlier, sends an important signal that we need to change course for the sake of our health and the environment.

Medical input on pesticides is growing

Over the years, we have seen the medical community weigh in on pieces of the pesticide problem. In 1997, the Council on Scientific Affairs of the American Medical Association (AMA) said, "Particular uncertainty exists regarding the long-term health effects of low dose pesticide exposure...Considering [the] data gaps, it is prudent ... to limit pesticide exposures ... and to use the least-toxic chemical pesticide or non-chemical alternative." More recently, the AMA raised concerns about the efficacy of the antibacterial triclosan, saying, "[I]t may be prudent to avoid the use of antimicrobial agents in consumer products." We have seen important articles in the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*, including one on elevated hazards associated with children's exposure to pesticides in the school environment and another linking rotenone exposure to Parkinson's disease. In 2010, the AMA on its website, *American Medical News*, addressed the link between organophosphate pesticides and ADHD (attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder).

Despite this important involvement, associations of U.S. medical practitioners have not engaged with a broad analysis of the large and growing body of science linking pesticides to adverse health effects, now captured in the AAP's policy statement and technical report. In Canada, in 2004, the Ontario College of Family Physicians (OCFP) strongly recommended that people reduce their exposure to pesticides wherever possible, after releasing a comprehensive review of research on the effects of pesticides on human health. OCFP's *Systematic Review of Pesticide Human Health Effects* shows consistent pesticide links to serious illnesses such as cancer, reproductive problems and neurological diseases, among others, and concludes that children are particularly vulnerable to pesticides.

Raising organic

While the October report, *Organic Foods: Health and Environmental Advantages and Disadvantages*, in *Pediatrics* has been criticized for not being unequivocal, its conclusions send some important signals, such as, "In terms of health advantages, organic diets have been convincingly demonstrated to expose consumers to fewer pesticides associated with human disease. Organic farming has been

demonstrated to have less environmental impact than conventional approaches." This is a broad conclusion that covers both overall exposure associated with disease and environmental contamination and degradation. The take away message advises that doctors talk to their patients about these issues, presumably because of the association to human disease. Could the language be stronger? Of course. But it elevates the conversation in the medical venue. Bottom line: this discussion is good and we should encourage it.

Meanwhile, the trade association for the pest control industry wants this discussion to go away, understandably. Many –not all– in the industry have built their business model on spraying poisons, not preventing pests through the elimination of the conditions that are attractive to pests and the adoption of exclusion techniques that keep pests out. Instead, the industry holds on to arguments that long ago proved out-of-touch, by pointing to EPA's pesticide registration as proof of safety, despite its acknowledged limitations.

A systems change

With a first do no harm orientation, the medical discussion can and should advance a dramatic transformation in the adoption of alternative systems that eliminate the need for hazardous pesticides. With a focus on the critical importance of adopting prevention-oriented organic systems, this issue of *Pesticides and You* takes a close look at problems associated with toxic chemical-based and biosolid-based systems for managing land. Clearly, there are things that we do in the management of land and buildings that establish vulnerability to unwanted insects, plants, and disease. As a result, we must evaluate practices and material inputs –starting with the soil– in this context, asking what they may do to undermine the ecological balance and the power of nature.

The systems in organic that are critical to success require a deep respect for soil life, its protection and nurturing. Solutions to environmental problems are most often found not simply in product replacement or the preference for one product over another, but in the overall management system –which is the premise of the certified organic systems approach.

Our choice is becoming clearer every day, as we see environmental degradation unfolding before our eyes. We have started the rebuilding of natural processes with organic systems that offer us the opportunity to begin repairing the planet. We must take bold steps

that recognize that the cost of surviving environmental contamination far outweighs the cost of preventing it. We are moving ahead and look to an ever-stronger voice coming from the medical community.



Best wishes for a happy and healthy holiday season, *Jay Feldman, Executive Director of Beyond Pesticides.*