

Memo to my critics: just the facts please

Medical Post
November 12, 2002
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In my column "Half-truths and falsehoods a tough blend to swallow," the *Medical Post*, Sept. 10, I disputed Toronto Environmental Alliance (TEA) claims that 2,4-D, the most commonly used herbicide in the world, is carcinogenic. Judging from two letters published last week, I clearly touched a nerve.

Before responding, I reiterate that I prefer to forego pesticides. For example, in our bird-rich garden, we used nematodes, not chemicals, to deal with cutworm infestation this summer. I don't like cosmetic pesticides, but some agricultural uses are unavoidable. In that column, I cited the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), a World Health Organization offshoot). Neither had concluded that 2,4-D is carcinogenic.

TEA toxic campaigner Rich Whate accuses me of wielding an industry brush of "lies and cheap shots." I acknowledge the use of industry data, as I did in that earlier column, but checked them against an array of peer-reviewed scientific journals.

A 1987 IARC monograph on the evaluation of carcinogenic risk stated that although some epidemiology suggested an association between exposure to some herbicides and soft-tissue sarcomas and non-Hodgkin lymphoma, "the results of these studies . . . are inconsistent." It also stated: "The associations found are weak, and conflicting conclusions have been reached by the investigators (and) most of the studies did not provide information on exposure specifically to 2,4-D."

Whate chooses to extrapolate the IARC evaluation as proof that 2,4-D "may" cause cancer. The corollary that it "may not" should not be discounted.

In 1996, in collaboration with the Food and Agricultural Organization, the WHO re-evaluated 2,4-D. It concluded it was not possible to assess its carcinogenic potential on the basis of available epidemiology.

The following year, in a peer-reviewed study, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency declined to classify 2,4-D as even a possible carcinogen and the EPA upheld that view in a followup list last May.

In the Handbook of Pesticide Toxicology last year, Cantox Health Sciences International researchers concluded "the extensive database of metabolic, toxicological and epidemiological studies on 2,4-D has provided no evidence 2,4-D poses any health risk to humans when used according to label directions."

Earlier this year, a study in *Critical Reviews in Toxicology* by University of Michigan researchers concluded, among other things, "despite several thorough in vitro and in vivo animal studies, no experimental evidence exists supporting the theory that 2,4-D or any of its salts and esters damages DNA under physiologic conditions."

I concede Whate's point that continued pesticide use exposes communities to avoidable health risks, but that's not pertinent to his critique of my column.

If I'm guilty of anything in that previous column, it may have my use of hyperbole to depict TEA as "peddlers of misinformation." But what else should it be called when you selectively interpret and present statistics or other material to bolster your case? When I put that to one environmental activist recently, her response was that "industry does it all the time."

Two wrongs don't make a right. If TEA and other critics of the pesticide industry are to have any credibility they should rely on facts, not supposition and fear-mongering.

The TEA report that touched off this exchange stated, among other things, that three-quarters of the advertising by the lawn-care industry "illegally misrepresents pesticides as safe." That's open to debate. Even Health Canada, while expressing concern about the wording of some ads, is equivocal.

The Globe and Mail has quoted Ross Pettigrew, Health Canada's regional manager in Guelph, Ont., as saying TEA is correct in stating the department's regulations "say it is illegal to label or advertise a pesticide in a manner that is misleading or erroneous."

TEA said companies using 2,4-D are wrong to claim their products are safe but Pettigrew noted his department reviews every pesticide approved for use "and those used in Canada have been determined to pose no risk to humans or the environment." Enough said—for now.

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