

HEALTH AND WORKERS DYING TO FEED US

This article in Scientific American is unusual among the articles defending the results of the Stanford University study finding no nutritional benefit in eating organic food in that it at least mentions the people on whom pesticides have an uncontested negative effect: the workers who tend the field (though it consistently calls them “farmers,” romanticizing the labor relationship often involved).

In a section titled, “No Need to Fear,” it twice notes that “farmers” are exposed to high levels of pesticides.

To date, there is no scientific evidence that eating an organic diet leads to better health.

What of all those studies I just mentioned linking pesticides to disorders? Well, exactly *none* of them looked at pesticides from dietary intake and health in people. Instead, they involve people with high occupational exposure (like farmers who spray pesticides) or household exposure (from gardening, etc). Judging pesticides safety by high exposures is like judging the health impacts of red wine based on alcoholics.

[snip]

The closest we have to studying the effects of diet on health are studies looking at farmers. However, farmers in general have high occupational pesticide exposures, and thus it’s impossible to tease out occupational versus dietary exposure. Even still, in this high-risk group, studies simply don’t find health differences between organic and conventional farmers. A UK study found that conventional farmers were just as

healthy as organic ones, though the organic ones were happier.

And while the UK study—which, by its locale, leaves out some of the more dangerous chemicals used here but not in Europe—shows that organic “field and packhouse workers” were only healthier than conventional workers because they were happier, it also showed that all the 605 farm workers involved had significantly poorer health than normal in the UK.

Thus, even in an article admitting that farm workers were exposed to high amounts of chemicals that it admits are dangerous, it concludes that “there is no scientific evidence that eating an organic diet leads to better health.”

As if the health of people who work to feed me has no effect on me at all.

It reminds me of a passage from Barry Estabrook’s *Tomatoland*. Three female tomato farm workers give birth within days of each other to seriously deformed children; they had worked without protection in a field sprayed with the fungicide mancozeb days before the babies were conceived and had been sprayed with methyl bromide regularly. Lawyer Andrew Yaffa sued the owner of the field, Ag-Mart, on behalf of one of the children, a boy who had been born with no limbs and other health problems. In a deposition, Yaffa got the President of Ag-Mart to admit the chemicals used on the field caused birth defects in lab animals, but distinguished that from the birth defects of the kids born to workers who had worked without adequate protection in his field.

“So in regards to the pesticides that you use day in and day out, as your sit here today you are aware that there are, in fact, studies linking animals who are exposed to these pesticides to birth defects?”

“Yes, there are studies.”

"This isn't new to you?"

"No, no, this is not new."

[snip]

"You knew for years that these pesticides were linked to birth defects in lab animals. We talked about that ... knowing the risk was there, why not be proactive and take that step before you have three women bearing children with such horrific defects?"

"Well, the three women were not all—I don't believe thta—this is my belief, so I—I—don't believe that the pesticides caused the birth defects. I believe that the pesticides have been tested to cause birth defects in animals, but I don't believe pesticides caused birth defects in those three women."

Sure, the President of Ag-Mart was playing a legal word game. But it's a word game often repeated by discussions of the dangers of pesticides, an admission that pesticides are bad for the invisible—often migratory and undocumented—people who work to feed us, but a confidence that they nevertheless are not bad for **our** health.

As if the only effect our industrial food system has on us is via our own ingestion of the problems it brings.