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LETTERS

Pesticide evaluations need to be based on facts

Re: Limits Remain to Pesticide Ban, Gideon Forman (The Daily News, Aug. 16) and Pesticides Are Poison, by Jean Cottam (Aug. 13).

Municipal and provincial governments and even health-related professional organizations have been taking advice on pesticides from those who are the least qualified to provide it, while ignoring those who have the essential expertise, such as Health Canada's Pest Management Regulatory Agency (PMRA).

Gideon Forman is the executive director of a CAPE (Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment) which is composed of many members besides health professionals, despite what may otherwise be claimed.

For example, Forman himself is not a physician; he holds a masters in philosophy, with later training in creative writing.

CAPE and Forman also seem to believe, with no scientific proof, that all synthetic pesticides cause cancer.

Despite popular belief, the Canadian Cancer Society, which has taken such a large and activist role against pesticides, is not a scientific organization: it is a volunteer advocacy and fundraising association, with not a single scientist on staff with pesticide expertise.

Jean Cottam, an Ottawa octogenarian historian who I am sure is sincere in her views, has written anti-pesticide letters to virtually every newspaper in Canada, constantly complaining that Health Canada's PMRA has few epidemiologists on staff and must therefore "be very weak in examining epidemiological studies."

While there have been numerous such studies published on the effects of pesticides on human health, many have shown that there are no discernable health problems, and those who find some correlation exhibit very weak and unconvincing links — but these are still used as the foundation of the activists' "proof" of pesticides' adverse health effects.

Epidemiology — seemingly unbeknownst to activists— is based upon statistics and thus generally requires very large numbers of participants (in the order of tens of thousands) before obtaining results that may be interpreted as convincing.

It is worth noting that the largest long-term study ever undertaken on pesticides (the U.S. Agricultural Health Study) showed an inverse correlation between the use of 2,4-D — the most common herbicide used on lawns — and colorectal cancer (30 per cent less cancer).

I do not believe that 2,4-D protects against any form of cancer, but such a finding only illustrates the problems with epidemiology.

Furthermore, no landscape and garden pesticide registered in Canada is even classed as either a carcinogen or probable carcinogen by the PMRA, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, or any other scientific agency.

I should state that I am the communications director for the Integrated Environmental Plant Management Association of Western Canada. My position, however is volunteer and unsalaried. I have been retired for seven years and receive no remuneration of any sort from any pesticide-related companies, manufacturers, distributors, or advertisers. I stay in this position due — and solely due — to my concern and dismay at the anti-science stances of so many environmentalist groups on both the pesticide and other science-based issues.

Like Forman and Cottam, I do not have formal training in pesticide science. Unlike them, I base my understanding on the effects of pesticides from legitimate scientific sources and the expertise of those qualified to provide advice, such as internationally respected toxicologists, scientists, and the PMRA.

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