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OCFP and Pesticides

All members of the Ontario College of Family Physicians should be ashamed of their organization's so-called review of literature on pesticides!

by Art Drysdale

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Art Drysdale, a life-long resident of Toronto and a horticulturist well known all across Canada, is now a resident of Parksville, British Columbia on Vancouver Island, just north of Nanaimo. He has renovated an old home and has a new garden there. His radio gardening vignettes are heard in south-western Ontario over two radio stations: Easy 101 FM out of Tillsonburg at 2 PM weekdays and CD98.9 FM out of Norfolk County at 11:40 AM weekdays.

Art also has his own website at <http://www.artdrysdale.com>

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While I was in the Toronto area in March, I had the opportunity to visit a well-known garden centre in Bowmanville. Rekker's Garden Gallery is a purveyor of fine plants and advice, and they have a companion wholesale business, Rekker Gardens Ltd., which supplies annual transplants to many garden operators, particularly in eastern Ontario. The two photos here are of their greenhouses with transplants in two stages of growth. Author photos.

I only met John Harmon, garden writer of Whitehorse, once--at a Canada Blooms show, but recently I had chatted with him on several occasions during our ICanGarden.com chats. He was just into a new venture of selling seeds from his Website (<http://www.tropicals-north.yk.ca/>) and an even larger change in his life was pending wherein he was going to be living and working even further north than Whitehorse for this summer. He told me there was only a radio telephone there, but he vowed, he would continue to write his gardening column!

John died early Friday morning May 7th. ICanGarden's Donna Dawson is putting together a book of condolences from John's many readers. If you appreciated John's gardening contributions, I suggest you send a note to that affect to Donna to be included for John's wife Joyce. Farewell gallant spirit, John!

The "review" on the "effects of pesticides on humans" by the Ontario College of Family Physicians (OCFP) that was released on April 23 is an unbelievably dishonest report by a body that obviously knows (or should know) better. To call it bad science is giving other examples of "bad science" an even worse name!

One of the prime examples to sight is their statement that "2,4-D was developed as the result of chemical warfare research during World War II designed to 'eradicate the Japanese rice crop.'" Nothing could be further from the truth. I have written before about my friendship with the late Dr. R. Milton Carleton who was generally identified as a co-developer of 2,4-D--at least as it relates to its use as a herbicide for home lawns. 'Milt' was a Chicagoan and the Vaughan Seed Company's research director from the late 20s until his retirement in 1967. Here's how he happened to end up working with 2,4-D as he wrote to me in a personal letter in December 1979.

"I probably know more about the history and use of this chemical than anyone alive. Dr. Franklin D. Jones, who discovered its phytochemical properties and patented its use as a control for unwanted plants, walked into my office right after WWII.

"He said he had a marvellous weed killer for drive[way]s. My answer was 'Frank, we have plenty of chemicals that will do that--even old crank case oil will do the job. What we need is a better control for crabgrass!'

"'Unfortunately,' he replied, 'it doesn't do too good a job on grasses; in fact they don't die unless you use so much that I suspect it's the carrier that kills, not the 2,4-D.'

"This set me to thinking--if it doesn't kill crabgrass, maybe it won't kill bluegrass, which proved to be true when I ran tests. That was the birth of modern selective weed killers."

'Milt' usually carried a flask around with him that contained 2,4-D from which he would drink on request "just to prove it harmless." Anyone who knew the distinctive smell of 2,4-D knew that he was actually drinking the real stuff. It didn't seem to harm him too much--he lived to the age of 87, and almost up to the end, drove annually from Chicago to his summer home off the US east coast. He moved to Sarasota, Florida in 1980.

The product was definitely NOT developed to eradicate rice fields. 2,4-D is a highly improbable herbicide to be used to "eradicate" rice. In fact, it very quickly became the world's most widely used rice herbicide, used to protect rice from yield-destroying invasive weeds. It is still extensively used by Japanese rice growers today. It has been an important tool used to increase rice production worldwide (and the production of wheat, barley, corn, oats, rye, etc.) and thus having a significant impact on reducing world hunger. That so-called fact as stated in the OCFP report alone makes the entire 'review' suspect. And, a closer examination reveals that nothing of what is presented should even be considered.

For example, as reported by Donald L. Page, executive director of the Industry Task Force II on 2,4-D Research

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Data, "the literature review was limited to a relatively small portion of the total epidemiology database. Of the more than 140 studies that are pertinent to the phenoxy herbicides, the OCFP reviewers found only a handful suitable for their purposes. The criteria used to determine which studies would be reviewed are not clear. It appears that studies showing an association between pesticides and cancer or other health problems were given priority over studies showing no association."

The OCFP review states, "Morrison et al. conducted a large study of 155,000 farmers in Canada and found a statistically significant increase in non-Hodgkin's lymphoma (NHL), the risk increasing with acres sprayed."

This is an extraordinary misrepresentation of the study according to Don Page. "Recent biomonitoring studies have demonstrated that pesticide application and number of acres applied is not a valid predictor of exposure. The study did not show a statistically significant increase in NHL, since the Standard Mortality Rate for NHL was 0.79, indicating significantly fewer deaths from NHL compared to the Canadian population as a whole. The study shows the Standard Mortality Rate from all causes of death was 0.72, indicating that these farmers are living longer than the average Canadian. The Standard Mortality Rate for all cancers was 0.76, indicating that these farmers have fewer deaths from cancer than the Canadian population as a whole.

"According to the OCFP review, this study is an indictment of pesticides."

Another anomaly, according to Don Page, "The U.S. National Cancer Institute has now spent 20 years and many millions of dollars testing the 2,4-D/non-Hodgkin's lymphoma hypothesis. They recently pooled the data from their three 2,4-D case-control studies, making one large study, and concluded in their analysis (De Roos, 2003) that there is no association between NHL and 'ever having used 2,4-D.' The authors of the section on non-Hodgkin's lymphoma in the OCFP review chose to ignore this.

"Apparently, De Roos, 2003 is another study which fails to meet the OCFP reviewers' criteria."

Donald Page goes on to state: "The OCFP review attempts to make a case that populations exposed to pesticides can expect a higher incidence of cancer and other health problems compared to the general population. Yet, it simply ignores a significant number of studies that do not support this hypothesis. The two Fleming studies in Florida (a mortality and a cancer incidence) are examples. Those studies found the overall incidence of cancer among the pesticide applicators to be significantly lower than the general Florida population adjusted for age, and the applicators to be in significantly better health. The authors of the OCFP review chose not to include these findings, or similar findings in other studies. These studies have shown that populations of applicators, farmers and chemical workers who manufacture or formulate 2,4-D products (and thus have a potentially higher exposure risk) have an overall mortality from cancer below that of the general population."

Is it not interesting that "reviews by the World Health Organization (WHO) of 2,4-D (1996), the U.S. EPA Carcinogenicity Peer Review Committee's fourth review of 2,4-D (1997), the European Commission (2001) and the New Zealand Environmental Risk Management Authority (2003) came to conclusions very different from the conclusions reached by OCFP, which is perhaps why they were not included in the Ontario review!

"Those four agencies--which are mandated to protect human health--are in agreement that 2,4-D is not an animal carcinogen, mutagen or teratogen, and that the epidemiology database did not present a convincing case that there is evidence of a causal relationship between exposure to chlorophenoxy herbicides and the development of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma (NHL) and other cancers in humans.

The OCFP review also "failed to include the comprehensive literature reviews by researchers attempting to quantify the contribution of pesticides to the overall incidence of cancer. Such reviews include Doll & Peto (1981), Doll (1998), Ritter (1997) and Gold (2002). All four of these reviews conclude that the major causes of preventable cancer are smoking, alcohol consumption, and life style (mainly diet) and that the contribution from pesticides is negligible. These conclusions are very considerably different from what is being suggested by OCFP, which is probably the reason they were not included."

Finally Donald Page points out that "The OCFP authors did not include comprehensive expert panel reviews of 2,4-D that do not support the conclusions reached in the OCFP review. Examples are Garabrant (2002), USDA/NAPIAP (1996), Munro (1992), the Canadian Centre for Toxicology, University of Guelph (1991), Ibrahim (1991) and the Canadian Centres for Toxicology (1987)."

After talking at length with Dr. Keith Solomon at the University of Guelph (he is chair of the Board of Directors of the Canadian Network of Toxicology Centres) about this, I looked up a little more information about Dr. (Sir) Richard Doll, professor emeritus of cancer research epidemiology at Oxford University. Both Don Page and Keith Solomon mentioned him. It is only about a year ago that the elderly good Doctor was at a meeting at the University of Guelph. The local news media reported: "when a local municipal politician asked Sir Richard if there was a connection between the use of pesticides and cancer, and if a ban was warranted on the use of lawn and garden pesticides, he responded, 'No. There's no scientific basis for it.'"

When are the doctors in the OCFP going to be honest with the public?

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