



Pesticides On Golf Course May Cause Cancer



Toronto documentarian Andrew Nisker's latest effort on CBC looks into the possible side-effects of pesticides used to improve the look of many golf courses.

BY [DAVE HILSON](#), TORONTO SUN

Judging by the weather, it won't be long now before those of us who are so inclined will be dusting off our clubs in anticipation of another golf season.

And if the myriad of swing thoughts that run through the mind as we get set for our first rounds weren't enough, here's something more disturbing to contemplate: Is golf, the game we love, making us sick?

Not from the mental anguish it causes as we hook, slice or duff another ball, but from the pesticides used to keep the courses in such pristine condition.

That is the question posed by Toronto-based documentarian Andrew Nisker as he sets out to discover the cause of his father's death in *Dad and the Dandelions*, which will air Thursday on the long-running CBC series *The Nature of Things*.

Nisker's father, a long-time golfer who, according to the activist, played six days a week, died a couple of years ago from the blood cancer non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. And Nisker, knowing his dad, a businessman, had not worked around such chemicals and had been healthy all his life, wants to find out why.

"Like all my films, it's a personal story that came from my life," the likeable Nisker says from beneath his Blue Jays cap as we sit down to chat at a local coffee shop.

"I try to tell stories to get people just to think, that maybe things aren't what they seem."

And what Nisker wants golfers to think about is do they have an unrealistic view of what courses should look like — rich, green, unblemished carpets — and is the cost of achieving that look harmful to individuals and the environment?

Now, Nisker is no golf-hater and didn't set out to target the industry. In fact, he says he loves the game and has fond memories of the many hours he and his father spent walking GTA courses together. But he does think golfers need to change their expectations and that the industry should dial back on pesticide use whenever possible.

"What was perceived as beauty to me growing up playing these particular courses, now is not so beautiful any more because I see what it takes to make them look like that," he says.

Nisker's journey to find answers took him to the biggest golf show in the U.S., where he was surprised to find out what a large role major chemical companies play at such events. There are interviews with industry and health professionals, a trip to an organic

golf course at Martha's Vineyard, where former U.S. President Barack Obama has played, and finally to the home of golf itself, St. Andrews, in Scotland, where the original links courses are far less intrusive to the environment.

"A lot of golf courses are shoe-horned into an environment, the vegetation should not be where it is. It's brought in as a look, as a feel," says Nisker, who spent a year and a half making the documentary. "It's unnatural to the environment (think deserts and tropical islands), which means it takes a tremendous amount of maintenance and chemicals to keep it alive."

During the documentary, we find out that golf courses are permitted to legally use pesticides that have been banned for use on lawns, parks and playing fields in Ontario and Quebec.

"If we're not using the pesticides in parks, or to maintain our lawns or playing fields why is it OK to use them on golf courses?," Nisker asks rhetorically.

Is Nisker able to make a direct link between the pesticides and his father's cancer? Not really. An American epidemiologist who was involved in the only epidemiological study of golf course superintendents, in the 1980s, says the link cannot directly be made because there are too many variables. But another expert says Nisker is on the right track.

Not everyone will agree with Nisker's conclusions, but by making us aware of the pesticide use, he does make us think.

"I understand that it's the small awakenings that people get that eventually lead to changes and shifts in society," he says. "You know, if we sat in this coffee shop 20 years ago, we'd probably be smoking. Things change."