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Look side ways at food scare stories

Written by Jacqueline Rowarth



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Food safety is in the news again in Europe after a media release from the Pesticide Action Network (PAN) in the EU in February.

The release suggested that food safety authorities are under the influence of the food industry and are ignoring the potential for cumulative effects of “multiple chemicals in food”.

The implication is that food can exist without chemicals; but, of course, all matter is made of chemicals. But it is the implication that food safety is being compromised that is raising alerts.

That is what PAN wants.

The PAN release stated that 28% of fruit and vegetables contain more than one pesticide.

In the associated coverage, a project co-ordinator is reported to have accused the authorities of “sticking to 50-year-old ways of risk assessment to make sure unsafe standards remain in place”.

This was vigorously denied by the Crop Protection Association and the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), both saying the reports were inaccurate, unsubstantiated and misleading.

This didn't prevent the coverage including the information that EFSA had reported in 2014, that "98.8% of organic products contained no traces of pesticides, or levels only up to the legal limit".

The comparable figure for conventionally produced food was not given.

In New Zealand, the Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI) May 2016 report on pesticide residues in plant products 2013-2014, indicated that 99.98% of foods tested were compliant. The 0.02% of samples not meeting these standards were then assessed for dietary risk; MPI concluded there was negligible risk to children or adults.

Food safety reflects good production and processing; it is not a feature of any one production system.

In 'Organic and Natural 2016', the Hartman Group reports that the primary meaning of organic to consumers is "grown naturally, with farm level purity". This in turn means "no pesticides, hormones or antibiotics".

Organic production systems do not allow administered growth hormones or prophylactic use of antibiotics; but natural, approved pesticides are used.

Derris dust contains rotenone, which comes from the roots of various members of the bean family. Historically it was in used in some cultures to make fish easier to catch: apply rotenone, wait for the fish to run out of oxygen, catch them as they come up to the surface. Pyrethrin occurs in members of the chrysanthemum family. It works through the nervous system and has been used for thousands of years to deter insects.

Copper sulphate is used in organic orchards in an attempt to control micro-organisms. Copper is an important trace element in humans, but if consumed in excess it causes vomiting, diarrhoea and, in extreme cases, death.

These chemicals are 'natural', but when used inappropriately can cause human health problems, as can pesticides in general.

New chemicals being approved and used in NZ are generally more specific and less potentially hazardous than those used in the past. Their introduction and use is regulated by the Environmental Protection Authority, working in partnership with

MPI. Chemical residues in food, and potential for toxicity through dietary intake, are monitored and regulated through the MPI food safety system.

This means all food is safe to eat (as long as the pesticides used to protect the crop have been used according to approved instructions) at point of purchase.

Food safety does, however, also require good storage and handling of food at home. MPI reports that NZ's most common food-borne problem is campylobacter associated with poorly stored and cooked chicken or unpasteurised milk.

Statements made about different food production systems, industry influence and food safety should always be investigated for accuracy, whether in Europe or NZ. Regulations have been developed for protection of consumers and misleading statements and claims are rife.

• *Jacqueline Rowarth is chief scientist at the Environmental Protection Authority which regulates the introduction and management of chemicals in NZ.*



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