

The Big City

By ACSH Staff — August 18, 2000

The topic of today's quiz is "Ethical Quandaries of Two New York Journalists in the Supermarket Produce Aisle." The first is John Stossel of ABC's "20/20," who did a report earlier this year comparing organic produce with regular produce. Most of it reflected conventional wisdom among scientists: organic food has no nutritional advantages and poses a greater risk of bacterial contamination because it is grown in manure.

He also reported that pesticides are not a danger in either kind of produce, which is not controversial either. The Food and Drug Administration regularly tests produce and finds pesticide residues in both organic and regular produce that are well below dangerous levels.

But Mr. Stossel erroneously believed and reported that ABC itself had tested samples and found no pesticide on either kind of produce. The samples analyzed by ABC had not been subjected to that particular test. After Mr. Stossel's confusion over the testing data came to light, as organic growers and environmentalists were demanding he be fired, ABC reprimanded him and suspended his producer. Last week he went on the air to correct the error and apologize.

Things were handled differently in 1989 after Ed Bradley informed viewers of CBS's "60 Minutes" that Alar, a chemical used by some apple growers, was "the most potent cancer-causing agent in the food supply today." The report was illustrated with a skull and crossbones superimposed on a red apple.

Scientists denounced the CBS report as inaccurate (there were more potent carcinogens than Alar), alarmist and possibly carcinogenic itself because the ensuing panic caused people to eat less fruit. Dr. Richard Adamson, then director of the National Cancer Institute's division of cancer etiology, called the cancer risk from eating an Alar-treated apple nonexistent.

Apple growers, who lost more than \$100 million in the national panic that resulted, demanded a correction and apology. So did the American Council on Science and Health, a consumer education group in New York, which repeated its request last year on the 10th anniversary of the scare. But CBS stood by its reporter and its story.

What conclusions can you draw from these two controversies?

- A) Organic farmers and environmentalists have more clout than apple growers and scientists.
- B) The need for accuracy is inversely related to the scareworthiness of a story.
- C) Journalists don't mind getting the whole story wrong, but they are passionately fastidious about details.

D) Pay no attention to any news about pesticides.

The simplest choice would be the last. Worrying about pesticides made sense in the 1960's and 1970's, when some scientists wondered if the new chemicals would lead to a surge in cancer rates. But the cancer epidemic never arrived, except in cigarette smokers and sun worshipers. From 1950 to 1997, the age-adjusted death rate for all forms of cancer except lung cancer declined by 19 percent, according to the National Cancer Institute. Most Americans don't know about that decline, in no small part because journalists prefer to focus on hypothetical scares based on animal studies or popular fears. They lavish attention on "cancer clusters" -- like football players in the Meadowlands or breast-cancer victims on Long Island -- even though clusters continually turn out to be unrelated to environmental pollutants.

The other crucial statistic that Americans haven't learned from the media is the one discovered by Bruce Ames, a biochemist at the University of California at Berkeley, who was one of the early crusaders against synthetic chemicals. He devised a simple test for detecting the carcinogenic potential of chemicals, and helped get some dyes and flame retardants banned.

But then Dr. Ames and a colleague at Berkeley, Dr. Lois Swirsky Gold, found that natural chemicals tested positive for causing cancer as often as synthetic ones. Plants and fruits had evolved with their own organic built-in pesticides. It turned out that 99.99 percent of the pesticides in the human diet occur naturally in food.

If our bodies can cope with the 99.99 percent, Dr. Ames asked, why devote so much effort to worrying about the remaining .01 percent?

"Pesticide residues are a nonissue as far as cancer prevention goes," Dr. Ames said yesterday. Accuracy is always an issue for reporters, and Mr. Stossel blundered by reporting the results of a nonexistent test. But the worst journalistic mistake has been giving the impression that the test even mattered.

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