Sham 'Study' on Organic Food and Pesticides in Urine Published by Friends of the Earth

By Alex Berezow, PhD — January 29, 2019

How do you know when a "study" isn't really a study? When the people who performed it wrote up a brochure hyping its results before actually bothering to publish a scientific paper.

The guilty party is none other than Friends of the Earth. Very excited about the results of their "study" (we'll get to the details on this in a bit), they got a bit ahead of themselves and published a "report" (which was really just a fancy brochure) and an executive summary. The original scientific paper? Well, that's not available yet. Sorry, scientists!

THE STUDY

Read our report.
Read our executive summary.
Read our scientific paper.
The Details of the "Study"

The methodological details [2] that are available prove definitively that this "study" is nothing more than a marketing stunt. Friends of the Earth (FoE) recruited 16 people (yes, count them, 16 whole people!) to switch from eating conventional food to organic food. Setting aside the ludicrously small sample size, there are multiple problems with their methodology.

First, when scientists perform studies like this, it is important to get independent samples. In other words, you generally don't want the volunteers to be related to each other or collaborating in some way. But FoE did the exact opposite. They recruited four families, which means their sample size is really more like 4 instead of 16.

Second, the study design didn't make sense. The point was to see if eating organic food, which arbitrarily bans certain pesticides, would cause a person's urine to contain less of those pesticides. Well, obviously, the answer is yes. You don't even need to perform a study to reach that conclusion. It would be like designing a study to determine if refusing to drink coffee or soda causes a person's urine to contain less caffeine. Of course it will. But that doesn't teach us anything. (The relevant question is if the pesticides are harmful, and the answer to that is a definitive "no.")

Third, they don't bother to measure urine levels of any of the pesticides used in organic agriculture. What do you bet those increased?

Fourth, scientists don't take photos of a study's participants and put them on display in a "Meet the Families" gallery [3]. And they certainly don't post testimonials about how awesome their study was. That's what marketers or activists do, not serious scientists.

The Biggest Joke of All

In the brochure that FoE published, there's a link to a site called OrganicForAll.org if you want the "full results, study methods and ways to take action." So I clicked the link. This is what you get:
Oops.

Once again, this isn't science. This is Marketing & PR 101. And Friends of the Earth can't even do that right.