

Atrazine: NYT Terrifies Over "Weed Killers" in Water

By ACSH Staff — August 22, 2009

All the news that's fit to scare. That was the thrust of this weekend's *New York Times* article by Charles Duhigg entitled "[Toxic Waters: Debating Just How Much Weed Killer Is Safe in Your Water Glass.](#)" [1]

As president of the American Council on Science and Health, I have been following environmental and health media articles for some three decades -- seeing how they measure up in terms of "honors" for exaggerated risk, biased reporting, misrepresented science, and pure sensationalism. The Duhigg article is clearly a contender for the all-time worst.

Duhigg argues that the widespread use of the herbicide atrazine is polluting our supply of drinking water and putting us all -- but particularly pregnant women -- at risk. He consistently refers to "recent studies" (but does not cite them) and concerned "scientists and health advocates" (but does not name any mainstream experts) who think that the Environmental Protection Agency is not protecting us from atrazine -- and that the manufacturers of the herbicide are somehow poisoning us. He cites "new research" showing that atrazine is hazardous even at low levels but does not specify his sources. He seems oblivious to the work of the most famous early toxicologist (Paracelsus, circa 1500) who set in place the time-honored premise: only the dose makes the poison.

Atrazine is a widely used herbicide -- applied on a variety of crops (corn, sugar cane, sorghum, and more). It is a tightly regulated chemical, and levels in water (where there could be spill-off from agricultural or other applications) are closely monitored by environmental agencies. It has been in safe use for over fifty years. There is a huge "safety factor" built in -- so that permitted trace levels are some hundred-fold less than what could have an adverse effect on human health. The Safe Drinking Water Act requires monitoring water for a multitude of chemicals, including atrazine. You would drown from drinking the huge amounts of water needed for you to be affected by trace levels of atrazine in any American water supply.

Duhigg appears to be playing to the fears (phobias) of consumers who (a) do not know where their food comes from -- and are unaware that without the use of agricultural chemicals like atrazine (which allow farmers to fight weeds, insects and disease) our food supply would be diminished by about half -- and (b) think that even a trace amount of any "chemical" in food, water, air, or consumer products is intolerable. The reality, of course, is that everything, including natural foods, is comprised of chemicals -- most of which are toxic and/or carcinogenic in animals at high dose but are perfectly safe when we consume them.

How much "weed killer" in your water is safe? Well, how much arsenic in your natural baked

potato is safe? (Arsenic occurs naturally in potatoes.) *The mere ability to detect a chemical in a substance -- in food, air, water, consumer products, or even human tissue -- does not signal that there is a public health hazard.*

Nowadays, when we have so many serious public health risks to face (cigarette smoking, obesity, swine flu, and more), Duhigg has given top priority to a bogus risk. And this is irresponsible. As a result of his article, he hopes that Americans will be demanding zero tolerance for atrazine in the water supply -- and we will incur huge expenses to accomplish this dubious goal, with absolutely no resulting health benefits, since there were never any health risks in the first place. Even the Environmental Protection Agency (the most stringent regulatory agency in the world and the most powerful, not known for downplaying chemical risks) stated that atrazine posed no known health risks when they approved re-registration of it in 2006. EPA has evaluated hundreds of studies finding "no evidence of a link to birth defects."

So why did the *New York Times* give such prominent coverage to a bogus risk? It is part of a general wave of "chemophobia." Earlier this month, the Times accepted a paid advertisement (an "op-ad") on their editorial page, paid for (at a price of about \$50,000) by New York's prestigious Mount Sinai Hospital and Medical Center. The paid-for editorial copy claimed that industrial "chemicals" (phthalates, BPA, etc.) were imperiling our children, when there was no basis whatsoever for such an assertion.

So it is "in" to scare people about "chemicals" in their air, food, water, and consumer products -- and apparently Mr. Duhigg and the Times elected to exploit this phobia. Unfortunately, scaring people about the quality and safety of their drinking water is not only without scientific basis, it is completely counter-productive, distracting us from the real public health hazards we face today.

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[1] <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/23/us/23water.html>

[2] <http://ACSH.org>