DDT: Misunderstood by Media

By ACSH Staff — March 3, 2014

In their recent op-ed *DDT Causes Reduced Cognitive Ability*, Dr. Donald R. Roberts, professor emeritus of Preventative Medicine at Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences, and Mr. Jasson Urbach, director of the health policy non-profit, Africa Fighting Malaria, advocate against the sensationalized coverage of DDT and Alzheimer’s Disease.

Over the years, the positive impact of DDT has been overshadowed by sensationalized reports drawing associations between DDT exposure and various diseases. It seems journalists are still after DDT even though research experts [2] and respected organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) have consistently supported its use for disease prevention and control. The authors describe DDT as the most successful public health insecticide ever introduced. In fact, since the mid 1940s to 1969 they added, WHO has estimated that DDT lifted the burdens of endemic malaria from the shoulders of almost one billion people.

Jason Richardson, PhD [3], from the Robert Wood Johnson Medical School and Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences Institute performed in vitro and observational studies to examine the potential effects of DDT on Alzheimer’s Disease (AD). However, Urbach and Roberts point out that the levels of DDT introduced in a laboratory setting are significantly higher than those used in the field. DDT by nature is not very toxic, and has limited biological activity, therefore, experimental researchers must assault laboratory animals with huge and unrealistic doses of DDT in order to get any kind of detectable biological response. In vitro assays carried out by Richardson et al show that neuronal cells were exposed to unrealistic levels of DDE (a metabolite of DDT). Moreover, they note that observational studies in human populations, also conducted by Richardson et al, exhibit a correlation between DDT and AD with DDT levels so low, they are meaningless.

The media can misconstrue preliminary studies and solidify non-existent relationships between DDT and certain diseases. However, as Urbach and Roberts emphasize, this has detrimental consequences for public health movements to end malaria. Not only does it become more difficult to use the current range of public health insecticides, but investment in much needed new public health insecticides is smothered. Indeed, sensationalized journalism can cause setbacks in public health progress in many arenas.
ACSH supports the efforts of Urbach and Roberts to protect the health of millions. Dr. Gil Ross has previously written about DDT and reacted similarly to claims following the Richardson study. Read more [here](http://acsh.org/2014/01/new-study-tries-link-alzheimers-disease-ddt-media-thinks-succeeded/).