



HOME ABOUT FAIR BLOG COUNTERSPIN EXTRA! FAIR TV TAKE ACTION STORE DONATE

E X T R A !

Nov
01
2000

West Nile Attack

Media foment fear of virus and obscure pesticide concerns

By [Karen Charman](#)

Tweet 0 Like 0 [Stur](#) submit

With the emergence of the West Nile Virus in New York and several other Eastern states, media coverage of pesticide issues has sunk to a dangerous new low. The outbreak, the first in the Western Hemisphere, began in New York City last year and has triggered a massive spraying campaign that has significantly increased pesticide exposures to more than 15 million people in the New York metropolitan area, surrounding counties and communities between Boston and Maryland.

Most media reports have painted a picture of a galloping mosquito-borne killer virus that can only be stopped by blanketing areas with pesticides where infected mosquitoes and birds turn up. Birds have so far spread the virus from Canada to Maryland, and public officials expect it to migrate further. Nearly all reports prominently mention that West Nile Virus killed seven New Yorkers last year and made between 55 and 67 others sick. In one story, the **New York Times** (8/19/00) detailed the plight of two unfortunate West Nile victims, one of whom said she would "prefer to die" than go through her ordeal again.

Patti Wood, director of Grassroots Environmental Education, an organization that distributes information about pesticides to schools and community groups, says such "incessant pounding" of the killer virus theme in the media has terrified people and gotten many to insist on pesticide spraying in their communities. Geri Barish, president of 1 in 9, a breast cancer survivor group, adds that while she does not want anybody to contract West Nile, the spraying itself is extremely dangerous. Yet, she says, information about the risks of widespread spraying and less harmful alternatives for dealing with the mosquitoes are downplayed or absent from most news reports.

In a story about the psychological impact of the outbreak, the **Boston Globe** (8/20/00) put the risk of West Nile infection in perspective: "Based on current information on casualties, the odds of an American dying of this summer's most dreaded virus are roughly 1 in a million, the statistical cutoff point for saying something has almost no risk at all." Earlier this year, the **New York Times** (3/21/00) reported a New York City Health Department survey of blood samples taken from people who lived in northern Queens, the epicenter

Search this Site

Click to support FAIR today
with your tax-deductible donation.

Get FAIR's Action Alerts

Your E-mail

SIGN UP

Tweets

Follow

Peter Hart @peterfhart 11h
@samsteinhp Indeed, some attackers said they were upset about video. As I wrote back then, this has been forgotten: fair.org/blog/2012/10/1...

Retweeted by FAIR

Expand

FAIR @FAIRmediawatch 10h
WaPo reporter claims both sides in debate over #KeystoneXL are exaggerating. He's half right. fair.org/blog/2014/05/0...

Expand

Jim Naureckas @JNaureckas 13h

Tweet to @FAIRmediawatch



of last year's outbreak, showed that 19 out of 677 tested positive for the virus. But none had become seriously ill, and all either reported no symptoms or mild illness, such as a low-grade fever. By comparison, more than 2,000 New Yorkers died from the flu last year.

Nevertheless, news reports continue to focus on the numbers of dead birds and infected mosquitoes, where they were found, spraying details--and public officials' comments on these topics. When critics' concerns about the spraying are included in a story, they are often dismissed a sentence or two later by another source.

One exception was a **New York Daily News** report (9/9/00) of a woman who was sprayed directly on the street and ended up in the emergency room after experiencing blurry vision, nausea, itching, coughing, choking and a swollen tongue. In the story, a New York City Health Department spokesperson says this incident was one of 200 complaints from people who called the city's pesticide hotline stating the spraying has made them sick. The reporter also noted that this case "raises questions about the account of city officials who as recently as yesterday insisted they were unaware of any incident in which New Yorkers suffered health problems as a result of exposure to the insecticide[s]."

Safe as chrysanthemums

Public health officials, academics and others who have studied infectious diseases have begun to warn the public to expect more disease and pest outbreaks. They attribute this to a variety of causes: global warming; increased development in unspoiled, exotic places like tropical rainforests; growing travel and trade with areas that have pests and diseases not found here; and the evolution of drug-resistant strains of bacteria. As Andrew Spielman, an expert in mosquito-borne diseases from the Harvard School of Public Health told **National Public Radio** (7/25/00) the day after Central Park was closed following the discovery of mosquitoes infected with West Nile: "We will simply have to learn to take these things in stride," because of the "certainty of other infections emerging in a similar manner over time."

Media reports, however, have encouraged the public to "take in stride" an increase in pesticide use by promoting a number of myths about pesticides and their consequences. Among them: Pesticide spraying must be safe, otherwise it would not be allowed; if pesticides were a serious health threat, the medical community would come out against them; pesticides are the only practical way to combat outbreaks of disease-carrying insects, so we have no choice but to use them.

Subscribe to the Digital Issue Here!

Top Posts & Pages

- [Gun Control, the NRA and the Second Amendment](#)
- [How To Detect Bias In News Media](#)
- [Craig Aaron on Net Neutrality, Anand Gopal on Afghan War](#)
- [What's FAIR?](#)

Visit FAIR's Online Store



**For t-shirts, books,
dvds, hats, mugs
and more!**

Digital **Extra!**



Subscribe Now—

Only \$15 a year for
12 monthly issues.

Media reports on the West Nile outbreak convey the idea that pesticide spraying is safe in several ways. Numerous stories rely on comments from public officials either supporting or directing the spraying program without seeking opposing viewpoints. A **Daily News** story (8/16/00), for example, stated that New York City Health Commissioner Neal Cohen "has insisted the spraying is safe and added that federal health officials 'encouraged' the additional spraying on Staten Island." The only other comment about the spraying came from a waitress at a diner in Brooklyn who indicated that though she didn't like it, spraying was "a necessary evil."

Several reports described the pesticides being used in the West Nile outbreak in reassuring language or downplayed the risks of exposure. The **New York Times** (8/13/00) referred to Anvil, the insecticide most widely used this year, as "a relatively nontoxic chemical." NBC's **Today** show (7/29/00) described Anvil: "Like the chrysanthemum flower, it's a natural pesticide...that looks like it was much safer than the Malathion that was used last year." The audience was further comforted by the statement that "they're using it wisely, using it in the evenings."

After quoting New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani ("you have to virtually... drink this stuff in order to have side effects"), the **Daily News** (8/21/00) did note "experts say that no pesticide can ever be deemed harmless." But, it added, the "minuscule quantities of pesticides like Anvil used to kill mosquitoes...should not hurt people." The story went on to say that since it was approved three years ago, "Anvil has evolved into the pesticide of choice," and that its active ingredient, sumithrin, "has been around for more than 20 years and is in scores of household products, from pet flea collars to bug spray."

Information gap

In truth, very little is actually known about the long-term human health or environmental effects of most pesticides currently in widespread use. And Anvil, a synthetic pyrethroid, is a perfect example.

The Environmental Protection Agency is responsible for approving pesticides that are sold. An EPA pesticide fact sheet dated November 1987 on sumithrin contains no information on the acute or chronic toxic effects when it is swallowed, absorbed through the skin or sprayed in the eye. Nor is there any information on whether sumithrin causes birth defects, genetic damage, is poisonous to birds or how it behaves in soil or water. The data sheet does say the chemical is "moderately toxic via the inhalation route" and that it can result in increased liver weights.

Nevertheless, the summary science statement concludes that "there are no indicated concerns for human exposure at this time." And the EPA continues to maintain that "pyrethroids do not pose unreasonable risks" to human health, wildlife or the environment, though they are toxic to fish.

Some of the missing information may be available after 2002, when a major data review of synthetic pyrethroids is scheduled to be completed; obtaining



data on the safety of a pesticide after it has been approved for use "is not atypical," an EPA staffer told **Extra!**, "You could say that by allowing it to continue to be on the market, we have made some sort of determination of safety," he added.

However, numerous independent studies of synthetic pyrethroids do not give these chemicals a clean bill of health. Synthetic pyrethroids, a class of more than 1000 broad-spectrum insecticides, are the most commonly used chemicals for indoor pest control. A study by researchers at the Mt. Sinai School of Medicine published in the journal **Environmental Health Perspectives** (3/99) found that synthetic pyrethroids are endocrine disrupters--interfering with sex hormones--and some, including sumithrin, promoted the growth of breast cancer cells.

A review of scientific studies on synthetic pyrethroids in the **Journal of Pesticide Reform** (Fall/90) revealed that these chemicals are also toxic to the nervous system in mammals, cause mild to severe eye and skin irritation, and that chronic exposure can damage adrenal and pituitary glands, the spleen and testes. Studies have also shown various synthetic pyrethroids can harm immune and reproductive systems.

Many media reports, however, contain statements from doctors or other scientists that the spraying is safe--or at least much less of a risk than the West Nile Virus. The August 21 **Daily News** story cited above quoted a doctor with the National Pesticide Telecommunications Network, an EPA-sponsored pesticide hotline, saying "the danger of West Nile is much more" than any potential side effects of Anvil. The **New York Post** (8/14/00) quoted a neurological researcher who said the amount of pesticide being sprayed "is not enough to affect us."

These reassuring statements hide a rather startling fact: Though pesticides have been widely used for more than 50 years, very few medical professionals are trained to diagnose either acute or chronic health problems from pesticide exposure. Dr. Philip Landrigan, chairman of the Department of Community and Preventative Medicine at the Mt. Sinai Medical School in New York City, says the average U.S. medical student gets only about six hours of training in environmental medicine in four years of medical school, and almost none of that focuses on pesticide toxicity.

Kristine Smith, a spokesperson for the New York State Department of Health, agreed, saying that all cases of pesticide poisoning reported to the state are reviewed by its own experts to determine if the illnesses are truly pesticide-related, because most of the doctors reporting them "wouldn't have the expertise to make that opinion."

Less toxic, more effective

While some stories carried comments from residents questioning whether the spraying was actually doing its intended job, only columnist Juan Gonzalez in

the **Daily News** (7/25/00) pointed out that pesticide spraying is a hopelessly inefficient method of combating a mosquito-borne disease, especially in an urban area like New York City. In order to work, the insecticide must hit the mosquito directly, says Dr. David Pimentel, an insect ecologist at Cornell University. But since spray trucks are only fogging the street side of buildings, he doubts that more than one-tenth of 1 percent of the poison is actually hitting its target. "And you have to put out a lot of material to get that one-tenth of a percent onto the mosquito," he told **Extra!**.

None of the dozens of stories reviewed for this piece mentioned there are much safer and more effective alternatives for dealing with adult mosquitoes. Prevention works best and is the least toxic way to control mosquitoes. Preventive measures include draining stagnant water where the pests breed, and applying less dangerous larvacides to lakes, ponds, drainage ditches and other areas to stop mosquito eggs from hatching.

If communities don't have prevention programs in place, a range of new technology is now available to deal with adult mosquitoes. There are traps that attract mosquitoes by emitting carbon dioxide--the same thing that attracts them to us. Or, if officials are wedded to the chemical approach, a new generation of affordable, biologically based substances are now available. "These biopesticides essentially eliminate the risks to humans and non-target organisms," says Chuck Benbrook, a pest management and pesticide policy expert who authored the 1996 Consumers Union book, *Pest Management at the Crossroads*.

However, these biopesticides require greater human skill and attention to the biology of the target pests than broad-spectrum synthetic pesticides. Benbrook says public officials involved in the outbreak missed a great opportunity to kickstart the development of the necessary infrastructure: "When a big public institution like the government of the city of New York fails to aggressively push for the innovative, modern, safer alternative, it is holding back that transition, because that's sending a signal to the [chemical] companies that if nobody's going to push them, they're going to keep selling this dirty old chemistry that has attendant risks, because it's the cheapest alternative."

The Pew Environmental Health Commission at the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health points out that chronic illness is now the No. 1 cause of death in the United States. The commission raises serious questions about the role of pesticides in the epidemic of chronic diseases, so dirty old chemistry may not be the cheapest alternative for the public. "Every time the American public has been given straight information to make a decision about pesticides, they always vote for the safer alternative," Benbrook says.

But the public can only make informed choices if they have the information. So far the media have failed to provide it.

Karen Charman is a New York-based investigative journalist who writes frequently about environment and health issues.

[Extra! November /December 2000](#)

Tweet

0

Like

0

0

•

[Stur](#)

submit

FILED UNDER: [EXTRA!](#) TAGGED WITH: [ENVIRONMENT](#), [EXTRA! NOVEMBER /DECEMBER 2000](#)

Facebook Likes

Fairness & Accuracy In Reporting

Like

51,556 people like Fairness & Accuracy In Reporting.

Facebook social plugin

You must be [logged in](#) to post a comment.

You must [log in](#) to post a comment.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported](#) License.
Site by [nigelparry.net](#)