

GM food is heading for your fridge

It may well be dangerous - and it is about to enter our food chain

Michael Meacher, The Guardian, Friday June 25 2004

Genetically modified food is coming to Britain. Two applications for the approval of GM animal feed are reaching their final stages in Brussels. This will lead to their import into the UK, and into the human food chain. The 1998 moratorium put in place by the EU to prevent this is being broken.

One of these applications concerns Syngenta Bt 11 GM sweetcorn. It failed to get a majority vote in the EU agricultural ministers' council but [...] it has now been approved by the commission itself [...]. The second application is for Monsanto NK 603 GM maize [...].

The safety of GM food remains a very open question. And one is not encouraged when the guardian of our food safety, the Food Standards Agency, [...] is so strongly pro-GM. They naively rely on company data to prove the safety of GMOs, despite numerous reports which have revealed the dubious credibility of company studies. [...]

The genetic material of any species can be recombined and transferred in the lab. Genes and new combinations can be introduced into our environment and food chain that have never previously existed. Indeed, GM DNA is often designed to cross species barriers. Its structural instability enhances horizontal gene transfer and recombination, the very process that creates new diseases and spreads antibiotic and drug resistance.

Against this background it is almost incredible, but true, that there have been no peer-reviewed clinical studies on the human health effects of GM food. Instead, when the biotech companies manufacture a new GM product, they compare it with its non-GM counterpart in terms of nutrients, toxins and allergens, and if they allege it to be "substantially equivalent", they deem it to be safe. Such an assumption would never be allowed in the regulation of pesticides or drugs. It is simply a device to circumvent direct trials of the effects of GM foods on human health, and ensures that GM crops can be patented without even animal testing.

In the tiny number of cases where tests have been carried out, the results have been worrying. A study in August 1998 by Dr Arpad Pusztai in Aberdeen found that young rats fed GM potatoes for just 10 days developed growth-like thickening of the stomach and intestinal lining. Could the overgrowth of the gut lining be a prelude to cancer? This was highly threatening to the biotech industry, but rather than pursue these questions, the research was closed down, and Pusztai vilified and hounded out of his job. [...]

In the US in 2000 many food products were accidentally contaminated with GM StarLink maize, and it caused allergic reactions in 50 Americans, some life-threatening. Recently in Germany 12 cows died after eating Syngenta's GM Bt 176 maize, and the company paid the farmer compensation.

None of these results [...] have ever been followed up by further research. Where research has been done, the results are sometimes suppressed. [...]

The last word should go to the doctors. The BMA says: "There has not yet been a robust and thorough search into the potentially harmful effect of GM foodstuffs on human health". The Medical Research Council believes more knowledge is needed of the effects of GM on metabolism, organ development, immune and endocrine systems, and gut flora.

Instead of pursuing the arid and polarised debate about GM, isn't that precisely what we should now do before we launch it into our food supply?

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Brussels – European Commission's registered office **Syngenta** – a large global agribusiness which markets GM seeds etc. **sweetcorn** – the yellow seeds of a particular type of the maize plant, which is eaten as a vegetable **Monsanto** – the leading producer of GM seed **maize** – a tall plant grown in many parts of the world for its yellow seeds which are eaten as a basic food, made into flour or fed to animals **GMO** = genetically modified organism **lab** – laboratory (to) **enhance** – (to) improve the quality, amount or strength of sth. **peer-reviewed** – (dt.) durch Fachleute überprüft (to) **allege** – (to) state that sth. bad is a fact without giving proof (to) **deem** – (to) consider/judge (to) **circumvent** – (to) avoid **thickening** – (dt.) Eindickung **intestinal** – (dt.) Darm- **gut** – (dt.) Darm- (to) **vilify** – (to) say or write unpleasant things about so or sth., in order to cause other people to have a bad opinion of them (to) **be hounded out** – (to) be forced to leave **BMA** = British Medical Association **foodstuff** – any substance that is used as food or to make food **metabolism** – all the chemical processes in your body, esp. those that cause food to be used for energy and growth **endocrine** – (dt.) Hormon- **arid** – very dry