

skin-deep beauty and surface truths? How do we face the truths of our lives, that what we perceive as ugly – that paralysing apnoea of recognition – says all we need to know about where society has faltered?

During such moments, I draw strength from Kate Webb. In one of her last interviews (she died on 13 May 2007, aged 64), she confided to me that in matters of conscience, as of heart, there are no boundaries or overriding principles. 'You come up with your own solution... then live up to that in your actions.'

That remains the key to many of our social ills, in our own lives and in the news media. Certainly, we need more courageous journalists to commit to truth and fight injustice. But we also need an audience that understands the price of admission in Disney's new media amusement park.

These days it barely raises an eyebrow that Disney – a company whose brand is a cartoon mouse – is one of a handful of conglomerates controlling global media, along with the likes of Time Warner, Viacom, Bertelsmann, General Electric and Murdoch's News Corporation.

We live in their mediated world where story boards resolve problems in the allotted time frames. Life doesn't follow art in an artless, ugly world. If it did, I'd now be quoting Keats, who, according to literary legend, died because of a bad review – 'snuffed out by an article', as Byron put it – and who believed the fiercest hell was failure in a great endeavour.

Our life work may seem a waste when, like Keats, we invest in outcomes rather than in actions. Ugly truth ferments and occasionally transforms society, with those responsible long gone without recognition, like Kate Webb, whose byline was writ on the world and changed the world.

During her captivity in Cambodia, when we thought she was dead, she had a moment of clarity, she told me, during an interrogation. She credited that moment as helping to secure her release. 'The old man, you know, I looked at his face and he was tired and sick. I said, "You're an officer doing your job, right? Well, I'm a journalist doing my job".'

If more journalists did their job as Kate did, we'd be released, too, from our own bemused captivity. Until then, our yardstick is the conscience and whether we honoured it. Only then can the ugly metamorphose again into beauty, if not in society, then inside ourselves. **E**

**Michael Bugeja is a journalist, author and educator.**



If I...

## ...were in charge of the UK's pesticide policy

says **Georgina Downs**, I'd make the protection of public health the overriding priority

**I**n a speech last year the former Prime Minister Tony Blair said that people must take more responsibility for their health. However, there are many things where the responsibility for public health lies directly with the Government and completely out of an individual's control.

For more than 23 years my family and I have lived next to crop fields that are regularly sprayed with toxic pesticides. Six years ago, after examining the Government's pesticides policy, I discovered that there has been (and continues to be) an inherent fundamental failure at all levels to protect rural residents and communities from exposure to pesticides.

The current method of assessing the risks to public health from crop-spraying is based on the model of a 'bystander', which assumes that there will be only occasional, short-term exposure (a few minutes). It also assumes exposure will only be to one pesticide at any time.

This model does not address those of us who are repeatedly exposed to mixtures (or 'cocktails') of pesticides and other hazardous chemicals, throughout every year, and in many cases, like mine, for decades. This means that there has never been any assessment of the risks for residents or communities exposed over the longer term, (including young children attending schools near sprayed fields).

Pesticides, by their nature, are designed to kill living organisms. They include insecticides, herbicides and fungicides. Sales of pesticides in 2004 totalled £467 million, representing 31,500 tonnes of active substances. Agricultural and horticultural uses accounted for 86 per cent of the value of sales and 80 per cent of the amount used. Garden (weedkillers), home (insect

sprays, head lice and pet flea treatments, timber treatments, etc.), forestry and amenity uses (e.g. highways, railways, airports, industrial sites, parks, landscape and sports turf) accounted for the balance.

People can be exposed to pesticides via air, water, contaminated surfaces and food, among other sources, and the routes of exposure include through the lungs (inhalation), the skin (dermal absorption) and the eyes, as well as ingestion (orally). There has now been more than 50 years of documented scientific and medical evidence in relation to the dangers of pesticides, the risks inherent in their use and the acute and chronic long-term ill-health effects that can result following exposure.

Even the safety data sheet for each pesticide product shows how hazardous these chemicals are, with warnings such as: 'Very toxic by inhalation', 'Do not breathe ...spray, ...fumes, ...vapour'; 'Harmful, possible risk of irreversible effects through inhalation'; 'May cause cancer by inhalation'; and 'May be fatal if inhaled'.

Yet despite these clear warnings, astonishingly there is currently no legal obligation for farmers to notify anyone of any intended spraying application or to supply information on the chemicals used, regardless of whether adverse health effects have been suffered.

Since 2001, I have continued to present considerable evidence to the Government, its agencies and scientific advisors regarding the serious failings of the existing regulatory system for pesticides in protecting public health.

As part of that evidence, I produced a video that featured individuals and families from all over the country reporting acute and chronic long-term illnesses and diseases in rural communities surrounded by sprayed fields.

Some of the acute effects that are commonly reported to me include sore throats, burning eyes/nose/skin, blisters, headaches, dizziness, nausea, stomach pains and flu-type illnesses.

The most common chronic long-term illnesses and diseases reported include various cancers (e.g. breast, prostate, stomach, bowel, brain, skin, leukaemia, and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma), neurological conditions – including Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis (MS) and myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME) – asthma, allergies, and many other medical conditions. Reports of this nature have gone on for decades and many are related to young children.

Nevertheless, the Government's Advisory Committee on Pesticides (ACP) and the Government regulators, the Pesticides Safety Directorate (PSD) and other government agencies

have continued to maintain that a robust system is in place to protect public health.

However, a year-long investigation by the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution (RCEP), published in September 2005, was highly critical of both the ACP and the PSD. It said that the level of confidence and assurance that had been given to Ministers, as well as the public, regarding the safety of people exposed to agricultural pesticides, 'represented too sanguine a view of the robustness of the scientific evidence'. The RCEP concluded that the current pesticide policy is inadequate and recommended an unprecedented overhaul, affecting all the Government agencies and departments responsible for pesticides.

**Y**et despite the fact that the Government had requested the investigation, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) rejected all the regulatory recommendations and seemingly dismissed the RCEP's criticisms of the inadequacy of the existing policy; refused to acknowledge the health risks inherent in the spraying of agricultural chemicals; continued to maintain that the current system is robust and that this is merely an issue of 'perceived nuisance'; and dismissed any link between pesticides and chronic ill-health conditions such as Parkinson's disease, MS, epilepsy, cancers and birth defects, among others.

This is in stark contrast to statements published by the European Commission last year in relation to the new proposed EU Thematic Strategy on pesticides, which acknowledged: 'Long-term exposure to pesticides can lead to serious disturbances to the immune system, sexual disorders, cancers, sterility, birth defects, damage to the nervous system and genetic damage.'

The Government's response to this issue has been of the utmost complacency, is completely irresponsible and is definitely not 'evidence-based policy-making'.

The principal aim of pesticide policy is supposed to be the protection of public health, therefore this should be the number one priority and take absolute precedence over any financial, economic or other considerations. However, the Government has continued to maintain the status quo and put chemical and industry

interests over and above protecting public health. There are a number of factors that need to be considered as to why this may be the case.

First of all, there are massive legal and political implications, as it is obviously the Government that licences pesticides for use. For years, Defra (and previously the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food) has made continued claims that pesticides are safe and do not pose any health risks – only for individual products to be withdrawn after years and in some cases decades of use.

Continued political denials of a problem will make it increasingly difficult – in terms of responsibility, accountability and liability – to admit any mistakes or that previous safety claims were in fact wrong. This then means, even in the absence of supporting evidence, that the Government's claims must continue and the status quo be maintained, as for the Government to publicly admit that there is any public health risk from pesticides would be an admittance of a fundamental systemic failure.

Secondly, as recognised in the RCEP report, there is an inherent conflict of interests in relation to the PSD, which receives 60 per cent of its funding from the agro-chemical industry. This is broken down into the levy charge and fees for applications. For example, the income generated from the agro-chemical industry for the year 2003/04 was £7,155,000.

**Pesticide use has brought devastating consequences for public health, animals, wildlife, air, water, soil, food and the wider environment**

Thus, even though PSD's main priority is supposed to be to protect public health and the environment from pesticides (its slogan is 'Safety for People and the Environment') this absolutely conflicts with the fact that its main customers/clients are the agro-chemical giants – so, by its very structure, the PSD has a financial interest in any policy decisions made.

The RCEP report noted that the PSD's structure seemed to make health and environmental considerations subordinate to pest control, and recommended that policy and delivery functions should not be managed by the same agency.

There are also issues involving conflicts of interests with a number of members of key Government scientific advisory committees, including the ACP, who have links with industry. For example, some members may undertake consultancy work, have shares in an agro-chemical company (or companies) and/

or receive funding for research support. This is again an inappropriate structure, as so-called 'independent' Government advisors cannot possibly be classified as independent if they have financial or other links with the very industries they are overseeing in relation to the hazards to human health.

**T**he stark reality is that the use of pesticides has resulted in devastating consequences for public health, animals, wildlife, air, water, soil, food and the wider environment, which has substantial economic and financial implications for all parties (with the exception of the pesticide industry) that are impossible to quantify. Obviously the personal and human costs to those suffering chronic diseases cannot be calculated in financial terms. The significance of these consequences requires the adoption of a preventative approach, to make sure that the protection of public health is the overriding priority.

To this end, I would want the Department of Health to be more involved than it currently is, as to date it has been Defra that has taken the lead on pesticides policy, even though Defra does not actually have any health directorate at all within the department.

Secondly, I would not allow any member of my scientific advisory committees to have any current links with the agro-chemical industry and would want to make sure that advice I receive is truly independent.

My policy would be based on the recognition that the only real way to protect public health and prevent any illnesses and diseases associated with pesticides, for now and for future generations, is to prevent exposure altogether through the widespread adoption of truly sustainable non-chemical and natural methods of pest and crop management (including rotation, physical and mechanical control and natural predator management).

The new policy and approach would combine the urgent need to protect public health and the countryside with societal and consumer demand for pesticide-free food, as the move away from chemical dependency and the strong ties with the agro-chemical industry to the development of sustainable non-chemical farming methods can only be encouraged and authorised by central government. It would obviously also be more in line with the Government's commitment to sustainable development, sustainable food and farming and sustainable communities, as the reliance on complex chemicals designed to kill plants, insects or

other forms of life, whether for agricultural or non-agricultural purposes, cannot be classified as sustainable.

Therefore it would obviously not be called a pesticide policy. Instead it would be called the Government's policy on Sustainable Pest Management (SPM). The agency in place of the PSD would thus be called the Sustainable Pest Management Directorate (SPMD) and the committee in place of the ACP would be the Advisory Committee on Sustainable Pest Management (ACSPM). The SPMD and the ACSPM would obviously have fundamentally different roles than those they do currently, which are largely related to the licensing and approval of pesticides.

One of the main arguments used by the NFU and others in objection to the widespread adoption of non-chemical methods is that yields would be reduced if pesticides were not used. However, studies from various countries around the world simply do not support this theory.

For example, one review of more than 200

food production projects involving simple, organic-type techniques in different countries found that they resulted in major yield increases, ranging from 46 to 150 per cent.

Other case studies in the Philippines have demonstrated that sustainable agriculture can be practised large scale; that yields do not necessarily drop without the use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides; and that a rapid (even immediate) transition from chemical farming to sustainable agriculture is possible if correct technical principles are followed.

Ethiopia has also been turning away from high-input, intensive agriculture to develop farming systems based on traditional and organic farming methods, with yields doubling, in some cases more; for example, yields of the common Faba bean increased five-fold from 500kg per hectare to 2,500kg per hectare. The practical evidence of the project's increased yields has convinced the Ethiopian government to abandon agrochemi-

cal-reliant agriculture and reorient national food and farming policy towards organic farming.

While it may not be possible to reverse the damage that has already been done to many people's health following exposure to pesticides, or the environmental damage, the situation will only become even more dire if radical changes in the UK are not made now. There have already been decades of Government inaction, as the Government has continued to allow the industry to set the agenda when it comes to pesticides. This cannot be allowed to continue.

Therefore my advice to the new Defra Secretary of State, Hilary Benn, is this: do not allow those aiming to protect industry interests to convince you that there is no evidence and that the current pesticides policy is protecting public health. I can assure you that it most certainly is not!

**Georgina Downs runs the UK Pesticides Campaign, [www.pesticidescampaign.co.uk](http://www.pesticidescampaign.co.uk), and has recently been granted permission to challenge Defra's pesticides policy in the High Court.**

Studies around the world show that growing food using traditional and organic farming methods brings big increases in crop yields



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