

PRESS RELEASE: 20/3/03

A Breath of Fresh Air?

Government assessments for the safety of pesticides sprayed on crops does not assess the risks to health for nearby residents and neighbours living in agricultural areas

A young woman from West Sussex is challenging the Government's record on the safety of agricultural pesticides claiming that existing methods of assessing chemical exposure in the countryside bear no resemblance to the actual exposures that people receive and the associated health risks from living in an agricultural environment. For nineteen years Georgina Downs and her family have lived next to heavily sprayed fields where they have been exposed to a variety of untested mixtures of poisonous chemicals that have seriously affected their health.

As a result of her investigations Ms. Downs has discovered what appear to be serious fundamental flaws in the regulations governing the approval and use of pesticides. The official method of assessing the dangers and risks to public health from agricultural spraying and under which chemical usage is approved, is based on the model of a "bystander" with the assumption being that there will only be the occasional short-term exposure, of no more than 5 minutes.

Ms Downs states, *"The bystander model is dangerously inadequate and bears no resemblance whatsoever to the sort of exposure scenario experienced by people who are actually living in these sprayed areas, 24 hours a day, every day. We are not bystanders, we are residents and neighbours and we are subjected to repeated pesticide applications, throughout every year, with no escaping the effects, as it's in the air and almost constantly contaminates the whole indoor and outdoor living environment."* She also states that because tests are based on individual pesticides, no account is taken of exposures to the cocktails of poisonous chemicals that are actually being used by farmers.

Ms. Downs has conducted a determined campaign aimed at changing Government Policy, as the current system is not protecting public health and is putting the health and lives of countless numbers of people at significant risk of harm. She has called for a ban on crop spraying and the use of pesticides near to people's homes, schools, workplaces and any other places of human habitation. She was invited to make a presentation at the Open Meeting of the Government's Advisory Committee on Pesticides where she openly challenged the Government's own scientists to justify their assessment methods. This led to the recent admittance by DEFRA's Pesticides Safety Directorate that *"Direct measurements of long-term bystander exposure, for example for a bystander living adjacent to a treated area, have not been made in the UK."* She has been featured in the Sunday Telegraph and on the Today programme on Radio 4 and most recently secured a meeting with Lord Whitty (Minister for Food and Farming) and Michael Meacher (Minister for Environment) to present her case.

To illustrate the situation Ms Downs produced a video utilising dummies at the edge of her property and cataloguing the multiple exposures to poisonous chemicals that could be experienced over just a one month period. Some of this alarming video footage will be featured in the BBC 1 programme "The Food Police" to be aired on Wednesday March 26th.

---Notes to editors---

- Pesticides are poisonous chemicals and are extremely hazardous to human health
- The principle aim of pesticide regulation in the UK is supposed to be the protection of public health
- Over 31, 000 tonnes of pesticides are sprayed on British farmland every year
- There is no legal obligation for farmers to notify anyone of any intended spraying application or to supply information on the chemicals being used, regardless of whether adverse health effects have been suffered
- Vulnerable groups include babies, children, pregnant women, the elderly and those with pre-existing medical problems and chemical sensitivity
- Countless numbers of people have regularly suffered and reported ill-health effects following exposures to these chemicals
- Ms. Downs was invited by Professor David Coggon, Chairman of the Government's Advisory Committee on Pesticides to present a paper entitled "*Why the bystander risk assessment does not equate to real-life exposure scenarios,*" for their Open Meeting on July 10th 2002. The paper and transcripts of the meeting can be found at www.pesticides.gov.uk
- A copy of the aforementioned video illustrating chemical exposure that was also presented at the ACP meeting is available upon request.
- As a consequence of the ACP meeting, DEFRA's Pesticides Safety Directorate was asked to carry out some further experimental work and to review the current procedures of risk assessment. Paul Hamey from PSD presented a paper to the ACP on January 16th 2003 entitled "Bystander Exposure Assessment," in which it was stated that "*Direct measurements of long-term bystander exposure, for example for a bystander living adjacent to a treated area, have not been made in the UK.*" (This also applies in the EU.) Ms. Downs made a submission in response to this paper, for the ACP meeting on February 27th 2003, and this is also available upon request.
- Ms. Downs was featured in the Sunday Telegraph on 28/7/02, 30/6/02 and on the Today programme on Radio 4 on 11/7/02 and in local media.
- Ms. Downs met with Lord Whitty and Michael Meacher on December 17th 2002 to present her case and is currently awaiting their response

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