

Rachel's Environment & Health News

#593 - Milk, RBGH and Cancer

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Two veteran news reporters for Fox TV in Tampa, Florida have been fired for refusing to water down an investigative report on Monsanto's controversial milk hormone, rBGH (recombinant bovine growth hormone). Monsanto's rBGH is a genetically-engineered hormone sold to dairy farmers, who inject it into their cows every two weeks to increase milk production. In recent years, evidence has accumulated indicating that rBGH may promote cancer in humans who drink milk from rBGH-treated cows. It is the link between rBGH and cancer that Fox TV tried hardest to remove from the story.

In the fall of 1996, award-winning reporters Steve Wilson and Jane Akre were hired by WTVT in Tampa to produce a series on rBGH in Florida milk. After more than a year's work on the rBGH series, and three days before the series was scheduled to air starting February 24, 1997, Fox TV executives received the first of two letters from lawyers representing Monsanto saying that Monsanto would suffer "enormous damage" if the series ran. WTVT had been advertising the series aggressively, but canceled it at the last moment. Monsanto's second letter warned of "dire consequences" for Fox if the series aired as it stood. (How Monsanto knew what the series contained remains a mystery.) According to documents filed in Florida's Circuit Court (13th Circuit), Fox lawyers then tried to water down the series, offering to pay the two reporters if they would leave the station and keep mum about what Fox had done to their work. The reporters refused Fox's offer, and on April 2, 1998, filed their own lawsuit against WTVT.

Steve Wilson has 26 years' experience as a working journalist and has won four Emmy awards for his investigative reporting. His wife, Jane Akre, has been a reporter and news anchor for 20 years, and has won a prestigious Associated Press award for investigative reporting.

The Wilson/Akre lawsuit charges that WTVT violated its license from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) by demanding that the reporters include known falsehoods in their rBGH series. The reporters also charge that WTVT violated Florida's "whistle blower" law. Many of the legal documents in the lawsuit --including Monsanto's threatening letters --have been posted on the world wide web at <http://www.foxbghsuit.com> for all to see.

No one will be surprised to learn that powerful corporations can intimidate TV stations into re-writing the news, but this case offers an unusually detailed glimpse of specific intimidation tactics and their effects inside a news organization. It is not pretty.

It has been well-documented by Monsanto and by others that rBGH-treated cows undergo several changes: their lives are shortened, they are more likely to develop mastitis, an infection of the udder (which then requires use of antibiotics, which end up in the milk along with increased pus), and they produce milk containing elevated levels of another hormone called IGF-1. It is IGF-1 that is associated with increased likelihood of human cancers.[1] (See REHW #381, #382, #383, #384, #483, but especially #454.)

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved rBGH for use in cows in 1993, but the approval process was controversial because former Monsanto employees went to work for the FDA, oversaw the approval process, then went back to work for Monsanto. (See REHW #381.)

Monsanto is notorious for marketing dangerous products while falsely claiming safety. The entire planet is now contaminated with hormone-disrupting, cancer-causing PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls), thanks to Monsanto's poor judgment and refusal to be guided by early scientific evidence indicating harm. (See REHW #327, #328.) The 2,4,5-T in Agent Orange --the herbicide that has brought so much grief to tens of thousands of Vietnam veterans --is another example of Monsanto's poor judgment and failure to heed

scientific evidence to prevent harm. Critics says rBGH is just one more example of Monsanto's monumentally poor judgment. When Wilson and Akre asked Monsanto officials to respond to these allegations of past poor judgment, Monsanto had no comment.

The Wilson/Akre rBGH series (a script of which is available on the web site www.foxbghsuit.com) makes the following points:

** rBGH was never properly tested before FDA allowed it on the market. A standard cancer test of a new human drug requires two years of testing with several hundred rats. But rBGH was tested for only 90 days on 30 rats. This short-term rat study was submitted to FDA but was never published. FDA has refused to allow anyone outside FDA to review the raw data from this study, saying it would "irreparably harm" Monsanto.[2] Therefore the linchpin study of cancer and rBGH has never been subjected to open scientific peer review.

** Some Florida dairy herds grew sick shortly after starting rBGH treatment. One farmer, Charles Knight --who lost 75% of his herd --says on camera that Monsanto and Monsanto-funded researchers at University of Florida withheld from him the information that other dairy herds were suffering similar problems. He says Monsanto and the university researchers told him only that he must be doing something wrong.

** The law required Monsanto to notify the FDA if they received complaints by dairy farmers such as Charles Knight. But four months after Knight complained to Monsanto, FDA had heard nothing from Monsanto. Monsanto's explanation? Despite a series of visits to Knight's farm, and many phone conversations, Monsanto officials say it took them four months to figure out that Knight was complaining about rBGH.

** Monsanto claims on camera that every truckload of milk is tested for excessive antibiotics --but Florida dairy officials and scientists on camera say this is simply not true.

** Monsanto says on camera that Canada's ban on rBGH has nothing to do with human health concerns --but Canadian government officials speaking on camera say just the opposite.

** Canadian government officials, speaking on camera, say they believe Monsanto tried to bribe them with offers of \$1 to \$2 million to gain approval for rBGH in Canada. Monsanto officials say the Canadians misunderstood their offer of "research" funds.

** Monsanto officials claim on camera that "the milk has not changed" because of rBGH treatment of cows. As noted earlier, there is abundant evidence --some of it from Monsanto's own studies --that this is definitely not true.

** On camera, a Monsanto official claims that Monsanto has not opposed dairy co-ops labeling their milk as "rBGH-free." But this is definitely not true. Monsanto brought two lawsuits against dairies that labeled their milk "rBGH-free." Faced with the Monsanto legal juggernaut, the dairies folded and Monsanto then sent letters around to other dairy organizations announcing the outcome of the two lawsuits --in all likelihood, for purposes of intimidation. (Conveniently, the FDA regulations that discourage labeling of milk as "rBGH-free" were written by Michael Taylor, an attorney who worked for Monsanto both before and after his tenure as an FDA official. See REHW #381.)

At the web site www.foxbghsuit.com, you will find the version of the Wilson/Akre rBGH series as it was re-written by Fox's attorneys. It has been laundered and perfumed. Most importantly, nearly all of the references to cancer have been removed from the script. Instead of cancer we now have "human health effects" --whatever those may be.

The Wilson/Akre lawsuit comes at an especially good time to

publicize the relationship between rBGH and human cancer because new evidence has come to light.

When a cow is injected with rBGH, its milk production is stimulated, but not directly. The presence of rBGH in the cow's blood stimulates production of another hormone, called Insulin-Like Growth Factor 1, or IGF-1 for short. It is IGF-1 that stimulates milk production.

IGF-1 is a naturally-occurring hormone-protein in both cows and humans. [3] The IGF-1 in cows is chemically identical to the IGF-1 in humans. [4] The use of rBGH increases the levels of IGF-1 in the cow's milk, though the amount of the increase is disputed. Furthermore, IGF-1 in milk is not destroyed by pasteurization. Because IGF-1 is active in humans --causing cells to divide --any increase in IGF-1 in milk raises obvious questions: will it cause inappropriate cell division and growth, leading to growth of tumors?

The Council on Scientific Affairs of the American Medical Association formally expressed concern about IGF-1 related to rBGH in 1991, saying, "Further studies will be required to determine whether ingestion of higher than normal concentrations of bovine insulin-like growth factor [IGF-1] is safe for children, adolescents, and adults." [5]

Monsanto's public position since 1994 has been that IGF-1 is not elevated in the milk from rBGH-treated cows --despite its own studies to the contrary. For example, writing in the British journal, LANCET, in 1994, Monsanto researchers said "...IGF-1 concentration in milk of rBST-treated cows is unchanged," and "...there is no evidence that hormonal content of milk from rBST-treated cows is in any way different from cows not so treated." [6] [Monsanto calls rBGH rBST (recombinant bovine somatotropin), thus avoiding use of the word 'hormone.']. However, in a published letter, the British researcher T. B. Mepham reminded Monsanto that in its 1993 application to the British government for permission to sell rBGH in England, Monsanto itself reported that "the IGF-1 level went up substantially [about five times as much]." [7] The U.S. FDA acknowledges that IGF-1 is elevated in milk from rBGH-treated cows. [4] Other proponents of rBGH acknowledge that it at least doubles the amount of IGF-1 hormone in the milk. [8] The earliest report in the literature found that IGF-1 was elevated in the milk of rBGH-treated cows by a factor of 3.6. [9]

Does IGF-1 promote cancer? In January of this year a Harvard study of 15,000 white men published in SCIENCE reported that those with elevated --but still normal --levels of IGF-1 in their blood are 4 times as likely as average men to get prostate cancer. [1] The SCIENCE report ends saying, "Finally, our results raise concern that administration of GH [growth hormone] or IGF-1 over long periods, as proposed for elderly men to delay the effects of aging, may increase risk of prostate cancer." By analogy, Monsanto's current efforts to increase the IGF-1 levels in America's milk supply raise the question: if little boys drink milk from rBGH-treated cows over long periods, will the elevated levels of IGF-1 increase their prostate cancer rates? This is not a question that should be answered by a wholesale experiment on the American people --but that is precisely what Monsanto is currently doing. It is difficult to put a happy face on this, try as Fox might.

The Wilson/Akre story is one of talented, hard-working journalists trying to tell an important public health story, exposing lies and corruption by Monsanto, by the FDA, and now by Fox, too. If nothing else, perhaps the courage of Steve Wilson and Jane Akre will awaken many more of us to the potential dangers of Monsanto's latest experiment on America's children.

--Peter Montague (National Writers Union, UAW Local

1981/AFL-CIO)

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[1] June M. Chan and others, Plasma Insulin-Like Growth Factor-1 [IGF-1] and Prostate Cancer Risk: A Prospective Study," SCIENCE Vol. 279 (January 23, 1998), pgs. 563-566.

[2] In his book MILK, THE DEADLY POISON [ISBN 0-9659196-0-9] (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Argus Press [Tel. (201) 871-5871], 1997), pgs. 67-96, Robert Cohen describes his extensive efforts to obtain a copy of this unpublished study from FDA. Cohen filed a Freedom of Information Act request for the study and was refused; he appealed within FDA and lost. He then filed a lawsuit in federal court and, again, lost. FDA and the courts agree that the public should never learn what happened to those rats fed rBGH because it would "irreparably harm" Monsanto. Based on the scant information that has been published about the weight gains of the rats during the 90-day study, Cohen believes that many or perhaps all of the rats got cancer. Weight-gain in the rats is described cryptically in Tables 1 and 2 in Judith C. Juskevich and C. Greg Guyer, "Bovine Growth Hormone: Human Food Safety Evaluation," SCIENCE Vol. 249 (1990), pg. 875-884.

[3] T.B. Mepham, "Public health implications of bovine somatotrophin [sic] use in dairying: discussion paper," JOURNAL OF THE ROYAL SOCIETY OF MEDICINE Vol. 85 (December 1992), pgs. 736-739.

[4] Judith C. Juskevich and C. Greg Guyer, "Bovine Growth Hormone: Human Food Safety Evaluation." SCIENCE Vol. 249 (1990), pgs. 875-884.

[5] Council on Scientific Affairs, American Medical Association. "Biotechnology and the American Agricultural Industry." JAMA [JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION] Vol. 265, No. 11 (March 20, 1991), pg. 1433.

[6] Robert J. Collier and others, "[Untitled Letter to the Editor]," LANCET Vol. 344 (September 17, 1994), pg. 816. Monsanto Senior Vice President Virginia V. Weldon, MD, says, "...the FDA has concluded from detailed studies that IGF-1 is not increased." See Virginia V. Weldon, "Re 'A Needless New Risk of Breast Cancer, Commentary, March 20'," LOS ANGELES TIMES April 4, 1994, pg. 6.

[7] T. B. Mepham and others, "Safety of milk from cows treated with bovine somatotropin," LANCET Vol. 344 (November 19, 1994), pgs. 1445- 1446.

[8] William H. Daughaday and David M. Barbano, "Bovine somatotropin supplementation of dairy cows: is the milk safe?" JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION Vol. 264, No. 8 (August 22, 1990), pgs. 1003-1005.

[9] C. G. Prosser and others, "Increased secretion of insulin-like growth factor-1 into milk of cows treated with recombinantly derived bovine growth hormone," JOURNAL OF DAIRY SCIENCE Vol. 56 (1989), pgs. 17-26.

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