First some good news from 1997:

** One drink a day of wine, beer, or hard liquor can be good for your health, at least if you are between the ages of 35 and 69, according to a study published in the NEW ENGLAND JOURNAL OF MEDICINE in December, 1997.[1] The study examined 238,206 men and 251,420 women who described their drinking habits in 1982 and were then followed until 1991. During the 9-year study period, 46,000 deaths occurred in the two groups. Those who took one drink a day had a death rate 20% lower than those who abstained. One drink was defined as 5 ounces of wine, 12 ounces of beer, or one cocktail.

The study found a 30% increase in breast cancer among women who took at least one drink a day (compared to women who drank no alcohol); however, in the death toll, this was offset by reduced deaths from heart disease. (Some researchers have speculated that alcohol promotes breast cancer in women by increasing the absorption of organochlorine compounds, such as pesticides, by raising their solubility. Ethanol (alcohol) is an excellent solvent for many drugs and is often used as a vehicle for medicinal mixtures.)[2]

An editorial in the same issue of the NEW ENGLAND JOURNAL OF MEDICINE [3] cautions that alcohol is a well-established cause of illness, violence, social disorder, and death. Alcohol contributes to at least 100,000 deaths each year in the U.S.--many of them youthful and violent.

** Men who have sex twice a week have a 50% reduced risk of dying, compared to men who have sex only once a month, according to a study published in the BRITISH MEDICAL JOURNAL in December.[4] In an earlier study, frequency of sexual intercourse was linked to decreased mortality (death) in men, and enjoyment of intercourse was linked to decreased mortality in women.[5]

The 1997 study reported the experiences of 2512 men living in six villages in Wales. The men were enrolled in the study ten years ago.

It is possible that this study confuses cause and effect. Men who are mortality ill may not feel much like having sex, and this might explain the findings.[6] However, the authors of the study believe their results are consistent with previous studies.

If their findings are confirmed by further study, the authors suggest a public health campaign to promote an active sex life. "Intervention programmes could also be considered, perhaps based on the exciting 'At least five a day' campaign aimed at increasing fruit and vegetable consumption--although the numerical imperative may have to be adjusted," they wrote.

And now a little bad news:

** During 1997, the United Nations issued its first-ever GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT OUTLOOK report, summarizing environmental trends around the world.[7] Here are some highlights from the 264-page document:

"Chemical pollutants are emerging world-wide as a pervasive environmental concern of highest priority. Environmental emergencies involving chemicals appear to be steadily increasing, and mounting evidence is being put forth about serious health risks posed by persistent organic pollutants."[7,pg.24]

"The increasing, pervasive use and spread of chemicals to fuel economic development is causing major health risks, environmental contamination, and disposal problems."[7,pg.10]

According to the U.N. report, "The Way Ahead" includes these trends:

"In many countries, there are trends toward decentralization of environmental responsibilities from national to subnational authorities, an increasing role for the transnational corporation in environmental stewardship and policy development..."[7,pg.9]

Indeed, evidence of these trends surfaced in the U.S. in 1997.

** A coalition of mainstream environmental groups had helped pass The Food Quality Protection Act of 1996 --a pesticide reform law --but in 1997 it became clear that this latest attempt to "regulate" corporate behavior has failed.

The 1996 law was a huge compromise. The mainstream environmentalists (chiefly Natural Resources Defense Council [NRDC] and the Environmental Working Group [EWG] in Washington, D.C.) gave up the Delaney Clause --a feature of the old law that completely prohibited carcinogenic pesticides from appearing in certain processed foods, such as apple sauce intended for children. Under the new law, the Delaney clause was scrapped in favor of numerical "risk assessments" of the cancer-causing potential of pesticides. The pesticide corporations wanted this change (scrapping Delaney in favor of risk assessment) very badly because the Delaney clause was an absolute ban, whereas risk assessment offers lots of wiggle room. As Dr. John Wargo of Yale University says, "[R]isk estimates may be easily manipulated to trivialize or exaggerate hazards."[8]

In return for abandoning the Delaney prohibition, the 1996 law gave environmentalists something THEY wanted very badly: a requirement that new pesticide "tolerances" (the amount allowed to remain in food on the dinner plate) must be reduced by a fudge factor of 10 to protect children's health.

The environmentalists put a lot of faith in that 10-fold lowering of pesticide tolerances. They hoped it would protect children despite these other shortcomings in the new law:[8]

** EPA has already established 10,000 different tolerances for pesticides without the fudge factor of 10 for children; it will be a long, long time (several decades, most likely) before those tolerances are revised.

** Children are exposed to pesticides in many ways that are not regulated by EPA. EPA's "tolerances" only affect pesticides on food.

But children can encounter pesticides in drinking water, the home, schools, day-care centers, lawns, gardens, playgrounds, ball fields, golf courses, swimming pools, in paints, and in treated lumber. EPA does not consider these other exposures when setting "tolerances" for pesticides in food, and the new law doesn't change that fact.

** Children are also exposed to non-pesticide chemical hazards in air, water, food, and soil. Under the new pesticide law EPA does not consider these other exposures when setting "tolerances" for pesticides in food.

** The new law prohibits states from adopting regulations that are more strict than the new federal law. Thus states lost an important right with passage of the new law. Many pesticides that have been banned over the past 20 years were first restricted or prohibited by states. Such early, precautionary action by states is now illegal.

** Despite the passage of the 1996 "pesticide reform" law, it is still true that:

(a) EPA does not know who is using what pesticides in what quantities on which crops in which locations. There is simply no record of pesticide use in this country (except for a state program in California), and the new law does not change that fact.

(b) How contaminated is the environment with pesticides? EPA has little or no idea. The new law does not change this.
(c) How are we (or our children) exposed to pesticides in different environments? EPA has little idea and the new law is silent on such questions.

(d) What adverse effects from pesticides are likely? EPA has not even established standardized ways of testing for various effects (e.g., nervous system; immune system; and genetic damage). After more than 20 years of effort, EPA remains astonishingly ignorant about the health effects of pesticides.

(e) The new law requires EPA to consider risks from chemicals that are toxic by "the same mechanism" but in the vast majority of cases, the mechanisms of toxicity are unknown or only poorly understood -- so this feature of the new law is virtually meaningless.

But that new fudge factor of 10 was written into the law by aggressive environmentalists, in the hope that such a fudge factor would at least partially compensate for all the other shortcomings of U.S. pesticide law.

But it was not to be. In late 1997 the NEW YORK TIMES revealed that EPA has been ignoring the new requirement for a fudge factor of 10 to protect children.[9] In 90 decisions on new pesticides since the "reform" law was passed, EPA has applied the fudge factor of 10 in only 9 instances, and has applied a safety factor of three in 10 more cases. Thus in 71 out of 90 decisions (79%), EPA has simply ignored the intent of the new law. Jay J. Vroom, president of the American Crop Protection Association (a pesticide industry trade group) says, "[W]hat the agency has done so far in applying the tenfold margin of safety... is reasonable."[9]

Naturally, the environmental community that fought hard for the new "reform" law was aghast at the way EPA turned the tables on them. "The EPA has failed to comply with the clear intent and requirements of the law," said Richard Wiles of the Environmental Working Group. "The [EPA] Office of Pesticide Programs and its oversight body, the Scientific Advisory Panel, have exhibited a singular lack of commitment to the new mandate of the Food Quality Protection Act." NRDC's Al Meyerhoff, who helped the Clinton administration write much of the new "reform" law, said, "We are witnessing the slow dismantling of the new statute, and it is a sad sight."[9]

Actually, it seems to us, the really sad sight is mainstream environmentalists continuing in a hopeless attempt to protect our children from pesticides. Do they not think that the mountain of campaign contributions flowing into the White House and Congress from pesticide companies has any real effect?

Do they really not see that the underlying problem here is the ability of pesticide corporations (among others) to influence the government as it suits them?

Will these mainstream environmentalists continue to seek public support on the false premise that they are tackling fundamental problems? Or will they acknowledge that they have been working in a regulatory arena created BY corporations, FOR corporations[10] --an arena in which the fundamental problem of illegitimate corporate power cannot be addressed?

--Peter Montague (National Writers Union, UAW Local 1981/AFL-CIO)


Descriptor terms: diet and health; wine; liquor; beer; breast cancer; environmental working group; ewg; natural resources defense council; regulation;