



Europe's children "paying the price" for current pesticide use

Brussels, Wednesday 7 March 2007 - Rising rates of mental and behavioural disorders could be slowed by tighter EU pesticide regulation, a Harvard University professor will tell the European Parliament today. (1)

Prof. Philippe Grandjean, Adjunct Professor of Environmental Health, Harvard School of Public Health says that when the fetus is exposed to harmful chemicals in the womb, it is the developing brain that is worst affected. His recent research reveals "a silent epidemic" in neurodevelopmental problems in children. "Children only have one chance to develop a brain but current EU safety testing is not adequate to protect the brain development of the fetus," he says. (2)

The World Health Organization emphasises that because their young bodies are still developing, fetuses, infants and children may be more vulnerable to toxic compounds than adults and thus require action that is tailored to protect their health. Dr Roberto Bertollini, Director of the World Health Organization's Special Programme on Health and the Environment, will explain to the meeting that when regulators establish the limits on the amount of a specific pesticide that can be "safely" consumed each day, they need to adequately take into consideration the special needs of children.

Children are regularly exposed to levels of pesticides residues in food that exceed safety limits and to "cocktails" of different pesticides. While pesticides in baby food are regulated in Europe, no protection is currently available for children eating normal food. (2)

A revision of the EU Directive on pesticide authorisation (91/414/EEC) has recently been put forward as well as a proposal for a new Directive to control pesticide use. The proposals are now being discussed by the European Parliament but concerns over the special sensitivity of children seem to be absent from the political debate. (3)

"Cases of behavioural and mental disorders and cancer in European children are increasing. We believe that the proposed revisions in the authorisation process offer an important opportunity to help protect the health of both children and other vulnerable groups," says Genon Jensen, Executive Director of the Health & Environment Alliance (HEAL), co-sponsor of the meeting and briefing paper.

Sofia Parente, Pesticide Action Network Europe, who is author of the report, says: "We would like to see 'hazard-based' criteria to exclude the most dangerous pesticides, notably those responsible for cancer, mutations, reproductive disorders and endocrine disruption, and the substitution of neurotoxic pesticides. However, ultimately, the level of exposure will only fall if Europe's agriculture reduces its dependency on pesticides via low-input and organic farming systems."

Both groups fear that although the scientific community is now aware of the inadequacies of the current risk assessment of pesticides, the European Commission does not appear to be planning to use the new scientific information in the approval process. Only in Denmark, where Professor Grandjean is professor, and in a handful of other forward-looking countries have governments have acted promptly to tighten their pesticide approval schemes.

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Notes for journalists

1. Invitation and details of the meeting at <http://www.env-health.org/a/2468>
2. See briefing "Cut back on pesticides for healthier lives" to be launched at the by Health and Environment Alliance and Pesticide Action Network Europe (<http://www.env-health.org/a/2468>)
3. The current proposal is for a revision to Directive 91/414/EEC and for a new directive of the use of pesticides. Existing legislation affecting pesticides also includes the Waste Framework Directive, the Directive on Hazardous Waste Residues (Regulation 396/2005 on Minimum Residue Levels (MRLs) and the Water Framework Directive.