



Media briefing

Serious health conditions caused by pesticides in France

Brussels, 27 March 2014 - A range of chronic health problems among agricultural workers in France have been linked to exposure to pesticides, insecticides and fungicides.

More than 40 farmers and agricultural workers in France have now had their cases of leukaemia, lymphoma, myeloma, Parkinson's disease and other chronic conditions recognised as occupational diseases related to acute or chronic exposure to pesticides, according to MSA, a French co-operative insurance company for agricultural employees.

France is Europe's largest agricultural producer, and it is also the continent's biggest user, by volume, of pesticides. Worldwide, only India and the United States use more. (1)

Pesticides' victims' network

Progress in gaining recognition for chronic conditions linked to pesticide use is largely due to a group of French farmers who came together in 2011 to create the association 'Phyto-Victimes' (victims of pesticides). (2)

The health problems among these farmers include leukaemia, bladder cancer, testicular cancer, prostate cancer, and Parkinson's disease. (See testimonies below).

They say that the chemicals to which they have been exposed include carcinogens, neurotoxins, and "endocrine disrupting chemicals". The latter are described as chemicals which can increase production of certain hormones in our bodies, decrease production of others and, imitate natural hormones – for example, by turning one hormone into another.

Many scientific studies and consensus statements have linked exposure to endocrine disrupting chemicals with male reproductive problems, including prostate and testicular cancer and Parkinson's disease. (3)(4)(5)

Policy position

In March 2013, members of the Phyto-victims association took part in a European Parliament hearing on "Agriculture: a risky business - how to improve health and safety." On this occasion, the association was invited to give their vision of the changes needed to allow agriculture to become healthy.

Paul Francois, the association's president focused on four points:

- Harmonization of legislation across the European Community,
- The establishment of independent testing and appropriate follow before, during, and after market authorisation,
- The establishment up of epidemiological studies on past and current users,
- A quick and definitive withdrawal of carcinogens , neurotoxins, and endocrine disruptors. (6)

Participation in film

Several of the farmers in the phyto-victims network share their personal stories in the film "Death is in the meadow", directed by Eric Gueret. (7) They are: President Paul Francois, who successfully sued US biotech giant Monsanto for poisoning him with a powerful weedkiller; Caroline Chenet-Lis, Vice President, who lost her husband to leukaemia; and, Jacky Ferrand, whose son died from bladder cancer, which is thought to be associated with pesticides used on vines.

Members of the network say they want to overcome the silence within the agricultural community about how pesticides impact health. Paul François says: "We always know someone who is ill, but it doesn't mean to say they want to talk about a link between their illness and the pesticides they use. More farmers need to speak up."

He also says he wants policy leaders to stand more firmly against the pesticide lobbies. "It will take courage. But the minister of agriculture or health or environment has to bang on the table and say: 'Stop lying. Stop poisoning our farmers, their families, the environment, and the consumer. We must change the rules!'" (7)

Individual farmer's testimonies

Neurological damage

Paul Francois: A story of David against Goliath

Paul François, president of L'association phyto-victimes (Victims of Pesticides network), won recognition that exposure to a pesticide, called Lasso, caused his chronic health problems in a court case against Monsanto in 2012.

In April 2004, Paul Francois went to clean out what he thought was the empty tank in his agricultural spraying machine. When he opened the cap, noxious fumes of some remaining pesticides escaped. He was not wearing a mask and therefore breathed in a lungful. Immediately admitted to hospital, he fell into a coma. He says that he is lucky to be alive. Lasso was taken off the market in 2007.

Since then, his illness continues to affect his kidneys and nervous system and he has again fallen into comas on several occasions. (8)

Leukaemia (Case 1)

Caroline Chenet asks: Why cancer at such a young age?

Caroline Chenet is Vice President of L'association phyto-victimes (Victims of Pesticides network). She lost her husband, Yannick, to leukaemia while he was still in his early forties. She says that since Yannick died, she has met many farmers who are ill. (7)

The following text is taken from the film, *La Mort est dans le Pre* (Death is in the Meadow). (7)

I'm Caroline Chenet. I'm a farmer. I'm 45.

When Yannick and I finally married, he was very ill.

His leukemia surfaced when he had a tooth pulled, and the wound kept bleeding.

Why had it struck a man of 37, in his prime?

The doctors finally told us. The pesticides he used on the farm had poisoned him.

My husband was not the only victim.

Parkinson's disease, lymphoma, prostate cancer, bladder cancer... Serious illnesses strike farmers.

Yet pesticide manufacturers, after 50 years in business, deny any responsibility.

Bladder cancer

Jacky Ferrand's son was told: "You have wine growers' cancer"

A photograph of Jacky Ferrand's son, Frederic, who died of bladder cancer in 2012, is available from Diana@env-health.org.

Jacky Ferrand is a board member of L'association phyto-victimes (Victims of Pesticides network). His son, Frederic, died of bladder cancer at the age of 41 years. In the film, *La Mort est dans le Pre* (Death is in the Meadow) (7), Ferrand says that he saw his son vomit after mixing pesticides to use on the vines.

After his son's death, he brought together 20 years of invoices and found that none of the chemical products that his son had been using were exempt of carcinogens. The following is exact dialogue taken from the film. (7)

Frédéric grows grapes. At the age of 41, he (Frederic) is fighting bladder cancer. His vineyards in Charente produce grapes for cognac. His doctor broke the news by saying, "Yet another! Sir, you have wine growers' cancer."

Jacky Ferrand has lost not only his son but his daughter in law and the couple's twins had to leave the area.

Without Frédéric, Laurence had to move away. She couldn't run the vineyard alone.

(the following testimonies are not included in the film)

Testicular cancer

Madeleine Sardin lost her son to cancer at the age of 28 years

Stephane Sardin, an agricultural mechanic, died of testicular cancer in 2013. His job was to maintain and repair tractors and machines for spraying, spreading and weeding. *"In his truck, it was disgusting,"* remembers Madeleine Sardin. *"The products were just behind him. There was no ventilation. The company had only provided him with gloves, not even an overall."* She says her son often complained

of headaches and stomach after using the pesticides. She and her husband believe that their son was poisoned by a cocktail of these products ingested in low doses over a long period of time. (9)

Leukaemia (Case 2)

Dominique Marchal was “treated with scorn” by the authorities

Dominique Marchal, a cereal farmer in the Vosges became the first person in France to win recognition that his **leukaemia** was work-related. When he was first ill, his wife suspected that his daily pesticide spraying on their 100,000 hectare farm might be the cause. But when they talked to the medical authorities about this idea, they were treated with such 'scorn' that it made Madame Marchal determined to fight.

She employed a lawyer to help her gather the scientific evidence and she herself set about gathering invoices and receipts to list which pesticides her husband had been using in previous years. Then, from their own pesticide stocks and with the help of neighbouring farms, she was able to gather samples of each of the potential cancer-causing substances. Her lawyer helped her find a laboratory willing to analyse the contents, and when the results came back they showed that 40 per cent contained benzene, a substance not marked on any of the contents labels but that is known to increase the risk of leukaemia. (8)

Parkinson's Disease

Gilbert Vende found support from his doctor

Agricultural worker, **Gilbert Vende** in Bourges, central France was drenched with the insecticide and fungicide known as Gaucho in 2001. A year later, he was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. His doctor gave him a letter linking his condition to exposure to this seed treatment. But even with this document, it took extraordinary diligence to win his case in October 2005 when he became the first person in France to have Parkinson's recognised as an occupational disease. He is now embarked on helping others. (8)

In October 2009, a second person in France had his Parkinson's disease recognised as an occupational disease. (8)

References

1. Charte du Comité des élus pour les alternatives des pesticides (Charter for alternatives to pesticides), Cross-party Senate report, see <http://www.comiteeluspesticides.fr/>
2. The farmers are members of the Phyto-Victimes network: <http://www.phyto-victimes.fr/>
3. State of the science of endocrine disrupting chemicals, 2012, An assessment of the state of the science of endocrine disruptors prepared by a group of experts for the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and WHO, <http://www.who.int/ceh/publications/endocrine/en/>
4. Chem Trust, July 2010, A review of the role pesticides can play in some cancers: Children, Farmers and Pesticide users at risk? <http://www.chemtrust.org.uk/pesticides-and-cancer/>
5. CHEM Trust, June 2011, Male Reproductive Health Disorders and the Potential Role of Exposure to Environmental Chemicals, <http://www.env-health.org/resources/publications/article/male-reproductive-health-disorders-829>

6. Phyto- victims in the European Parliament, March 28, 2013, www.phyto-victimes.fr/2013/03/phyto-victimes-au-parlement-europeen/

7. The film, La Mort est dans le pré – Death is in the meadow – Der Tod aus den Wiesen, directed by Eric Guéret, in French with English and German subtitles, to be shown at European Parliament, A5E2, Thursday, 27 March 2014. Introduction at 17:30, film starts at 18:00, followed by a short debate and reception. It can be seen in French here <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mAHf2Y5t7Ck>

8. The Ecologist, 2010, [Pesticides and cancer: victims fight for justice](#)

9. Le Magazine du Monde, 22 February 2014, La chimie, c'est presque fini.

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