

Media lashes multiply

Organic: how food is supposed to be

Despite critics, organic foods are good for you. Many of the claims made by opponents do not stand up to scientific scrutiny and the alleged links to disease are just nonsense, argues Shane Heaton.

ORGANIC food is booming. Consumers want it. Demand is growing faster than in any other food category. And growers can't convert quickly enough to keep up with demand.

But as the organic sector grows, it's standing on increasingly bigger toes in the battle for our hearts, minds and stomachs and attracting attacks from proponents of agricultural chemicals and genetic engineering, which are banned in organic farming.

Most recently, articles have been written pouring scorn on organic food and those who choose to buy it. They make many inaccurate claims about organic food, use unchecked and outdated statements from other publications and demonstrate a striking lack of knowledge about the subject.

While the articles claim that the absence of pesticides on crops can stimulate the production of naturally occurring plant "toxins", what they don't say is that many of these so-called toxins are powerful antioxidants in the human diet and are increasingly thought to be the reason fruits and vegetables are so healthy for us. A recent Danish review concluded that organic produce was likely to contain 10-50 per cent more of

This article was recently published in major newspapers in Perth, Melbourne & Brisbane in response to an opinion piece by Bettina Arndt. The editors of each paper were compelled to publish our response when Shane pointed out blatant plagiarism in Arndt's article and what he described as "a woeful lack of knowledge" about organic food and farming.

these beneficial compounds.

The latest example of research revealing the nutritional differences between organic and non-organic produce was carried out on kiwi fruit by scientists at the University of California – Davis, a university known for agricultural research that has generally focused on the benefits of intensive farming and GM crops.

The researchers said: "All the main mineral constituents were more concentrated in the organic kiwi fruit... resulting in higher antioxidant activity. It is possible that conventional growing practices utilise levels of pes-

ticides that can result in a disruption to phenolic metabolites in the plant that have a protective role in plant defence mechanisms".

They found organic kiwis had 17% more polyphenols – antioxidants that reduce the production in the body of harmful chemicals called free radicals. The organic produce was also found to have 14% more vitamin C and greater concentrations of several important minerals such as potassium and calcium.

Opponents of organic food often claim it's dangerous. They



erroneously throw “unpasteurised” and “organic” products into the same bag and mention a death because of unpasteurised juice in the US from E. coli poisoning. In an article about organic food this is misleading at best and maliciously deceptive at worst.

Opponents also repeat the lie that people who eat organic food are eight times more likely to contract a deadly strain of E. coli. This claim originates from a 1998 article by Dennis Avery that falsely attributes the finding to the US Centres for Disease Control. Avery's claim has been denounced by the CDC for so long I'm astounded to see it still in print.

Many bodies, including the CDC themselves and the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation, have concluded that organic farming may actually reduce food poisoning caused by E. coli.

The organic movement is not based on a notion that scientific progress is inevitably bad. But it does question the sense of polluting our environment, bodies and babies with constant doses of agricultural chemicals that organic farming shows are not necessary.

Every time an agricultural chemical is banned it shows the nonsense of claims for the previous few decades that it was safe. Chemicals like DDT can still be found in Australian breast milk. Belgian researchers found that women with breast cancer were six times more likely to have pesticides, including DDT, in their bloodstreams.

Hawaiian researchers who followed 8000 people for 34 years found that increased consumption of fruit and the pesticide residues they carry significantly raised the risk of Parkinson's disease. Evidence like this is emerging all the time. Organic farming is not based, as is sometimes asserted, on practices used a couple of hundred years ago, but rather a growing understanding of soil ecology and systems design that goes far beyond the 60-year-old technology of poisoning everything you don't want out of a field.

To the despair of its opponents, organic agriculture has been offering lessons in the application of agro-ecological science, empowerment of rural communities, feasibility of certification and traceability systems, ability to respond to consumers' demands and functioning of supply chains.

Genetic modification has so far promised much and delivered little to global agriculture. Pesticide and herbicide reductions have been short-lived and benefits for consumers have failed to materialise. Meanwhile, the health and environmental consequences of genetically modified crops are far from known.

Unpredicted side-effects of GM crops are one of the theories about why bee populations in Europe and the US are mysteriously disappearing. Without bees to pollinate them, it's feared crops could fail on a massive scale.

The potential risks of GM should not be underestimated, nor should legitimate concerns be dismissed as baseless scare-mongering. Attacks on organic food are part of a global battle



Attacks on organic food are part of a global battle for the hearts and minds and wallet for your consumer dollar.

for the hearts and minds and wallet for your consumer dollar. Will your food choice be organic or GM?

I believe many of those who refuse to advocate organics do so because of a mistaken view that its higher price may lead to reduced fruit and vegetable consumption. But I'm convinced it's a false

assumption.

ABS figures show that the typical Australian household spends more on junk food than on fruit and veg, more on alcohol than fruit and veg, more on takeaways than fruit and veg and five times more on recreation than on fruit and veg.

It comes down to a matter of priority and it's simply not true that people can't afford organic food. Some people actually find they spend less on food when they go organic because they stop eating a lot of junk food.

For consumers who want to know what is and is not in their food, organic standards and certification give them a clear statement. Organic food is not a luxury. It's how food is supposed to be. ■



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Shane Heaton is a qualified nutritionist and author/researcher of numerous books including *Organic Farming, Food Quality & Human Health, Stay Younger Longer, The New Optimum Nutrition Bible and Optimum Nutrition for the Mind*. He's the nutrition spokesperson for the Biological Farmers of Australia, and while no longer seeing patients, he instead runs SE Queensland organic home delivery company freshorganics.com.au.