

# From the trenches

» Shane Heaton discusses a key point of contention in the ongoing organic debate.

I believe we should all welcome debate about organic food and farming. While it might sometimes appear negative and we're not winning it as quickly as some would like, the organic movement's inherent goal of a root and branch change in agriculture and much of the food system will take time. Turning around an oil tanker under full steam doesn't happen quickly, especially if there are others tugging on the wheel to try and wrench it off course. We're talking about a paradigm shift here and it takes time. Any such shift goes through three stages. First they ignore you, then they ridicule you – then they simply accept your view as if they've known it all along and it's nothing new. It looks to me as though we're moving from the first to the second stage at present.

But, as I say, I think we need to welcome debate. It brings out the substance of what is undeniably a very big issue. The organic movement has an essence of integrity at its core and I believe we'll progressively win those debates, with a steadily growing, compelling body of credible evidence confirming the advantages of organics. In this magazine I'll regularly share with you the main criticisms of organics – claims, counter claims, and the latest research shining light on the issues of health, food and farming. The battle is only just beginning.

Here's a good example. One of Australia's leading nutritionists recently commented to

me in a discussion about the nutritional advantages of organic food, that any differences were irrelevant. "We need people to eat more fruit and veg," she said, "and telling them to buy more expensive, harder-to-get food is the wrong message." "OK", I replied. "Let's look more closely at this..."

Everyone interested in nutrition and public health agrees encouraging greater consumption of fruit and vegetables is the simplest and most effective way to improve peoples' health. Some believe that encouraging greater consumption of organic food works against this ideal, and therefore organics should not be promoted. It's assumed that if people buy organic instead of non-organic food, they'll buy less because of the high price. I strongly believe this is a false assumption. The average household can easily afford the premium for organic food if they buy less junk food (fizzy drinks, crisps, cakes, biscuits, ice cream, chocolate, sweets, etc.). Or fewer cigarettes. Or less alcohol. How do I know this? Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics shows the average household spends more on junk food than on fruit and vegetables each week. More on alcohol than fruit and veg. And the cigarette market is six times the size of the organic food market.

Let me make an assumption. With a household food and drink budget most people will tend to buy the 'essentials' first – fruit, vegetables, cereals, some ready-made meals, bread, milk, meat, etc. – then use

what's left to buy 'luxuries' – junk food, alcohol, cigarettes, take-aways and the like.

The key factor here is whether or not consumers consider organic food to be essential or luxury. As people learn more about differences in nutrient content, pesticide residues, animal welfare, food safety, environmental impact and so on, many do come to believe that organic food and farming are essential for the health of ourselves and the environment. If people switch from conventional to organic on the 'essentials', it's entirely likely they will then spend less on junk food, alcohol, cigarettes and take-aways, and indeed, research has confirmed that organic consumers have different consumption patterns from non-organic consumers along these lines.

So, if my assumption is correct, switching to organic food would not only mean consumers get more nutrients and fewer toxins in their now largely organic diet, they'd also potentially consume less alcohol, fewer cigarettes and less fat and sugar-laden junk food. The benefits to their health, that of their families, and public health in general, could be enormous.

They'd also avoid the considerable uncertainties regarding the health implications of multiple pesticide residues, GMOs, anti-biotic resistance, nitrates and artificial food additives. Those who argue there's no compelling scientific evidence of definite harm from these issues must also



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concede that there's so much we don't know and there's equally no evidence they are safe. Consumers pursuing wellness know better than to wait for scientific consensus on such issues, and often make a personal choice instead to follow the precautionary principle.

Another important point in this question of how best to improve peoples' fruit and veg intake is the issue of taste. A common experience of organic consumers is that organic produce tastes better. Kids especially notice the difference, and I've heard numerous reports from parents whose kids start actually enjoying fruits and vegetables when they make the switch to organic. Where they previously struggled to get their children to eat any 'healthy food', all of a sudden they start asking for more. And they

feel great giving them foods they know aren't doused in pesticides.

So which is the better strategy to encourage greater fruit and veg consumption? I'm convinced the organic argument of "It's good for you, tastes great, doesn't pollute the planet, didn't risk the farmer's health when growing it, and won't slowly poison your family" is likely to be far more effective than "Go on, it's good for you. Don't worry about the pesticides – it's cheap!"

The environmental and biodiversity benefits of organic farming are well documented and generally accepted. Buying organic food supports organic farming and thus benefits the environment. Do those who advocate increasing consumption of non-organic fruit and vegetables really think it's

wise to pursue wellness with no regard to our environment? Can you be truly well while supporting practices that pollute the environment and reduce biodiversity?

So the bottom line is that if people go organic they get more nutrients, fewer toxins, and probably decrease their consumption of health-robbers like cigarettes and junk food. Whether or not to go organic is a question of priorities. If pursuing optimum health and wellbeing is a priority for you and your family, than it's a very good idea. If your priorities currently lie elsewhere, that's fine. It's your journey. But your choices leave a toxic legacy for future generations, and as a father of two, I'd really rather you didn't.

Cheap is expensive, and organic food isn't a luxury – it's how food is meant to be. 