



Holding back the chemical tide

“We need a multi-pronged, national approach to regulate what ag./vet. chemicals are allowed into the country.”

By JAN NARY

RESearch findings about the danger posed to farmers' health by commonly used farm chemicals supports the decision of many farmers to “go organic” and avoid exposure.

Dr Liz Hanna of the Australian National University says the health of Australian farmers is being subjected to serious risks by exposure to some of the most dangerous chemicals available.

These can inflict molecular-level damage on humans, harming the immune system and

establishing a predisposition for cancer, diabetes and Parkinson's Disease.

Dr Hanna presented her research findings, which focused on chemicals being used in regions of rural Victoria, at a health forum hosted by the Cancer Council of Australia late last year.

“The survey covered regions where many chemical groups had been used over the years.

“I asked all members of more than 1000 households to nominate the chemicals they used, the frequency of their use and the exposure risks taken. Some people remembered as children being encouraged by their parents to hop into sheep dips to move the sheep along and to stand in



paddocks and act as human markers for aerial spraying – planes would go over and drench them and they'd spend all day completely covered with the chemicals, having been sodden to the skin."

Dr Hanna served on several hospital and clinical health boards in Victoria and was Head of the School of Nursing at La Trobe University's Shepparton Campus, where she discovered that 20% of the student cohort had moved or thought about moving house because of family health problems believed to be related to past use of chemicals.

"The Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority (APVMA) has very little contact with the medical community," Dr Hanna says. "APVMA's main source of income now comes from the cost of regulating chemicals. APVMA doesn't test chemicals on the Australian market but relies on safety assessments conducted by the chemical companies themselves.

"All other chemical regulatory bodies report to the health department yet APVMA reports to DAFF (Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry)."

Dr Hanna says training courses were instituted for people handling chemicals but only 40% of people using farm chemicals actually took the course. She says more cautious chemical users tend to be those whose family has been touched by cancer.

"Farmers frequently don't follow regulations and guidelines for chemical use and often the only limit on use is the expense. There is a prevailing attitude that if they get sick they'll be fixed by the health system, but the health system doesn't always ask the necessary questions or acknowledge there's a problem.

"Doctors can be inadequately educated about ag/vet chemical dangers and farmers are resistant to government 'interference' so no monitoring is undertaken nor statistics kept," Dr Hanna says.

APVMA is responsible for products only up to the point of sale; thereafter the responsibility rests with the states. Dr Hanna points out that the Federal Environmental Health Department is under-resourced to deal with issues, having an annual budget of only \$1 million and a staff of just four to cover environmental health for the whole country.

"We need a multi-pronged national approach to regulate what ag/vet chemicals are allowed into the country, how they can be used, compliance monitoring and annual rolling sample testing of anyone who uses the chemicals.

"We need to treat chemicals very, very cautiously – preferably moving towards not using them at all – and drive a shift towards safer 'green chemistry'.

"Chemical users need to be aware of their own safety and of their neighbours' rights," Dr Hanna says.

She says, additionally, once under soil is damaged "you've knackered the environment – I fail to find an argument that supports flooding our land with ag/vet chemicals", she says.

Dr Hanna is convinced that funding for testing (despite problems in establishing causality after the use of many chemicals over many years) would demonstrate that poor health patterns in rural communities are connected with the regular use of farm chemicals.

She says there also needs to be more research into the active benefits of organic farming to help indicate the degree to which many rural health problems are linked to chemical exposure.

"Lack of evidence does not indicate lack of harm being done; it indicates lack of research being undertaken," she says. ☺



Dr Liz Hanna's research has found farm chemicals can be a hazard to farmers' health.

Understanding & achieving optimum soil balance

A SWEP soil test will show you the health and balance of your soil, and how to maximise its productivity using the "Mikhail soil balance system™"



SWEP

ANALYTICAL LABORATORIES

www.swep.com.au

(03) 9701 6007

Special offer!

BFA members receive 10% discount