Study Urged Into Possible Peril Of Chemical Escaping Into Food

By Victor Cohn
Washington Post Staff Writer

A class of synthetic chemicals called PCBs (for polychlorinated biphenyls) has "escaped into the environment" and may be causing as much mischief as DDT.

This charge has been made by Dr. Robert Risebrough of the department of nutritional sciences at the University of California at Berkeley. PCBs, he says, are used in many household and industrial products—waxes, floor tiles, brake linings, scores of plastics and adhesives.

Like DDT, he reports—citing several scientists' evidence—they have now found their way into fish, sea birds, human fat and human mothers' milk.

Risebrough was backed yesterday by Rep. William D. Ryan (D-N.Y.), who demanded establishment of food tolerance levels by the Food and Drug Administration and a ban on PCBs' use in some insecticides by the Agriculture Department.



United Press International

Rep. William F. Ryan wants the government to issue tolerance levels and a partial ban on widely used PCBs.

FDA Acts on Additives

The FDA itself acted yesterday to revoke permission for use of what a spokesman said is "between 1,000 and 10,000" food additives—various chemicals, spices, flavors and even packaging materials—that were previously allowed under old, laxer law. Now the food industry must resubmit requests to use them within 90 days.

Health, Education and Welfare Secretary Robert H. Finch maintained in a speech that there are cancer-causing agents in so many foods that it is impossible to eliminate them all and still have an adequate food supply.

On food additives:

• The FDA told processors to resubmit requests for approval for an yadditives given informal approval before passage of 1958 food amendments and not covered under other regulations.

• "We're really trying to inventory the prior sanctions issued on food additive. This is the only way we can find out, said FDA Commissioner Dr. Charles Edwards. This is because old FDA records are poor.

• He declined to name any specific additives, because "we don't want to put the finger on anybody at this point. What we want is to know what's in use, and what we have to evaluate." Unless told otherwise, he said, processors can keep using previous substances.

"Unavoidable Cancer Cures

On cancer-causing agents, Finch told the Pharmaceutical Manufactures Association in Boca Raton, Fla., that:

• "There are unavoidable carcinogens (cancer-causers) so widely spread that we cannot eliminate all traces of them," and some "may even be essential to human health in the right amount and concentration.' Among such natural substances he listed selenium in wheat, aresenic in shrimp and benzopyrenes in smoked and broiled foods.

• Present law prohibiting use of any additive that causes cancer in animals is too arbitrary, "and we must have legislation" to establish approved levels for some substances. What he seeks is to change the present Delaney amendment under which he acted against cyclamates—artificial sweeteners—because they caused cancers in mice. He will be opposed by some scientists who maintain that present safety laws should be strengthened, not weakened.

Possible 'New DDT'

On PCBs — branded as a possible "new DDT" in the environment — Dr. Risebrough made his first public report in the January-February issue of Environment.

PCBs are chemical compounds made by Monsanto Chemical Co., and in Europe and Japan by other firms. They have been found in falcons, eagles, gulls and many fish, indicating they are widely spread through the food chain — and somehow coming from chemical companies' smoke stacks, or from wastes, weathering or trash-burning.

U. S. British and Swedish scientists have found them in some human fat, and Risebrough found them in mothers' milk in Berkeley and Los Angeles.

The amounts found were small — .06 parts per million in the human milk, for example. But establishment of tolerance limits in food is clearly essential," Risebrough said, citing evidence that they affect enzymes which in turn affect sex hormones in pigeons.

Ryan said they cause birds to lay eggs with shells too thin to protect embryos, and harm animals' reproductive capacity.

'Not Highly Toxic'

Replying, Monsanto told Environment it is "concerned over PCB's presence in the environment, but that they are "not highly toxic," and there have been no adverse effects when feedings up to 100 parts per million were made in rats.

Risebrough disputed this, saying a Utah State University scientist detected effects on enzyme production in rats fed only to 100 parts per million.

But mainly he called for accelerated research to determine these chemicals' effects in animals and humans, and to learn just how they are getting into the environment.

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