Letters to the Editor

Comments by HEW official concerning PCB problem

Editor, The Statesman:

Recent reports and editorials in your newspaper have criticized the Food and Drug Administration's handling of the current PCB problem. Let me clarify a few points about FDA's involvement in this matter.

Late in the afternoon of Aug. 15, 1979, the U.S. Department of Agriculture reported to FDA's Seattle District Office that it had found PCB residues in slaughtered chickens from Ritewood Farms in Franklin, Idaho. The finding stemmed from USDA's routine sampling program of slaughtered livestock and poultry from across the country; there was no reason to suspect a problem with PCBs.

The next day, FDA selected the best qualified investigator available in the area to look into the matter.

He quickly concluded the work he had in progress in Oregon, prepared for the new investigation, and flew to the scene on Monday, Aug. 20. He began his investigation immediately.

I believe that this was an appropriately swift and proper response to a problem that, at the time, appeared to involve only one farm and did not represent a life-threatening situation. For that same reason, we did not believe it necessary to alert the public to what appeared to be a routine investigation.

Those viewing the incident with the advantage of hindsight may say that FDA should have acted with greater dispatch to what turned out to be a serious contamination problem. But FDA responds to a great many reports by USDA of animal drug or chemical residues in slaughtered livestock and poultry. The vast majority turn out to be isolated incidents that are easily corrected and pose no threat to human health.

In this PCB investigation, FDA checked the obvious possible sources of the contamination but found nothing. On Aug. 29, the FDA did confirm the contamination of chickens and eggs on the one farm. FDA immediately notified the Idaho Department of Agriculture, which joined FDA and USDA in the investigation. Mineral was not identified as the source of the problem until Sept. 12, and then only because of the farm's bulk retention of a forgotten portion of the meal.

Since the beginning of the investigation, approximately 100 FDA employees have been working to track down the source of the contamination and remove any contaminated products from the marketplace.

I share the concern of your readers for the safety of their food. There is no way for the government to prevent industrial accidents of this nature. I believe, however, that FDA acted promptly and responsibly to protect the health of the residents of Idaho and all other affected states.

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EADERS

Boys Crying Wolf?

Editor:

Now that the PCB scare is tapering off, the chickens killed, the eggs destroyed, and the blame placed, we can all forget the whole thing. All of us can forget except the unfortunate ones who had to destroy their own property because of the bureaucratic whim and unfortunate heralding of prospective danger to people's health.

In retrospect it seems that the only government person who acted rationally was the one who went on vacation with the samples left on his desk. The F.D.A. has cried wolf so many times that we people would dismiss the alarm with no concern if it weren't for the amplifiers of doom—the news media.

The F.D.A. has stopped us from eating tuna fish because a ton of it might have harmed us; cranberries because we might get something bad from them, saccharin because some mice died, and laetrile because they don't know about it. Now millions of chickens and eggs are destroyed but no one has told us yet how dangerous they were.

What does 12 parts per million mean to our health? Is that worse than inhaling the smoke from my luncheon companion's cigarette?

It must be much worse than the child who had dropped the cake on the floor and then picked it up and ate it. No chickens died of cancer and no people got sick of it but it must be bad stuff. It must be real bad!

My problem is that I don't believe it. I don't believe the tuna fish with the mercury contamination would have harmed me. I don't believe the cranberries would have harmed me. And if I had cancer and was dying of it I'm sure the laetrile would do me very little harm. I am also sure that the sugar I use does more harm to me than the saccharin substitute.

My question is why are the government agencies causing all of these problems, attendant higher prices, worry, and mistrust? Furthermore, will we believe them when the danger is really at our doorstep, or will we simply label them as the boys crying wolf?

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