

REMARKS BY DAN R. BISHOP
DIRECTOR,
ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNICATIONS
MONSANTO COMPANY
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DIOXIN AND THE NEWS MEDIA -- A CRITICAL REVIEW

SINCE LATE IN 1982, AFTER PUBLIC HEARINGS FOCUSED ATTENTION ON DIOXIN CONTAMINATION IN THE STATE, THE PUBLIC, AND ESPECIALLY RESIDENTS OF THE ST. LOUIS AREA, HAVE BEEN BOMBARDED RELENTLESSLY WITH NEWS STORIES ABOUT THIS CHEMICAL AND ITS ALLEGED DANGERS.

THE STORIES TYPICALLY LABEL DIOXIN "ONE OF THE DEADLIEST SUBSTANCES KNOWN" AND REPORT THAT ANIMAL TESTS SHOW IT CAUSES A VARIETY OF HEALTH PROBLEMS. MOST STORIES ALSO SAY THE SAME EFFECTS ON HUMANS ARE SUSPECTED, THOUGH "TEST RESULTS ARE INCONCLUSIVE."

IN RECENT MONTHS, REPORTS HAVE BEEN MORE SCIENTIFICALLY THOROUGH, QUALIFIED AUTHORITIES ON THE SUBJECT HAVE BEEN RELIED UPON MORE OFTEN, AND KNOWN FACTS ABOUT DIOXIN HAVE BEEN MORE THOROUGHLY REFLECTED.

HOWEVER, THE FEAR GENERATED BY THOSE EARLY PUBLIC HEARINGS AND REFLECTED AND REINFORCED IN NEWS REPORTS, CONTINUES TODAY UNABATED.

IN LIGHT OF EXTENSIVE STUDIES OF THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE WITH DIOXIN, THIS LEVEL OF FEAR IS SIMPLY UNWARRANTED.

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DIOXIN IS, INDEED, A USELESS, UNWANTED TOXIC CHEMICAL. IT EXISTS ONLY BECAUSE IT CAN BE PRODUCED UNINTENTIONALLY AS A CONTAMINANT DURING THE MANUFACTURE OF CERTAIN INDUSTRIAL CHEMICALS AND PESTICIDES AND AS A BY-PRODUCT OF CERTAIN NON-INDUSTRIAL COMBUSTION PROCESSES.

PRACTICALLY EVERY NEWS REPORT CONCERNING DIOXIN CONTAINS THE STATEMENT: "THE LONG-TERM HEALTH EFFECTS FROM EXPOSURE ARE UNKNOWN." THIS IS SIMPLY NOT TRUE. THE SCIENTIFIC LITERATURE ON DIOXIN -- WHICH CONSISTS OF MORE THAN 4,000 TECHNICAL ARTICLES -- IS REplete WITH DOCUMENTED INFORMATION CONCERNING WHAT DOES AND DOES NOT HAPPEN TO HUMANS FOLLOWING EXPOSURE.

A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE SHOWS, FOR EXAMPLE, THAT:

- NO PERSON IS KNOWN TO HAVE EVER DIED AS A RESULT OF EXPOSURE TO DIOXIN...AND...
- THERE IS NO ACCEPTABLE EVIDENCE THAT DIOXIN HAS CAUSED CANCER, BIRTH DEFECTS OR ANY OTHER LIFE-THREATENING DISEASE IN HUMANS.

THESE CONCLUSIONS ARE SHARED BY MANY RESPECTED SCIENTIFIC ORGANIZATIONS INCLUDING THE AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION AND THE BRITISH ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON PESTICIDES. OTHERS WHO HAVE STUDIED THE EVIDENCE AND CONCUR INCLUDE A HOST OF INDEPENDENT MEDICAL EXPERTS, THE VETERANS' ADMINISTRATION AND THE U.S. AIR FORCE.

SO WHY ALL THE FUSS? WHAT ARE THE FACTORS THAT HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO THE CURRENT STATE OF PUBLIC FEAR? THERE ARE SEVERAL.

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FIRST, THERE IS THE ANIMAL DATA. THERE'S NO DENYING THAT DIOXIN IS VERY TOXIC STUFF WHEN FED TO SOME SPECIES OF LABORATORY ANIMALS. THE GUINEA PIG IS BY FAR THE MOST SENSITIVE. HOWEVER, OTHER TEST ANIMALS CAN TOLERATE DOSES RANGING FROM 100 TO 7,000 TIMES GREATER THAN THOSE WHICH AFFECT THE GUINEA PIG.

IT IS ON THE BASIS OF ITS EFFECT ON GUINEA PIGS THAT DIOXIN HAS BEEN CALLED "ONE OF THE MOST TOXIC SUBSTANCES KNOWN TO MAN," (COINCIDENTALLY, THE GUINEA PIG IS ALSO EXTREMELY SENSITIVE TO SOME HIGHLY BENEFICIAL CHEMICALS, INCLUDING PENICILLIN.)

ANOTHER EARLY, ALBEIT MAJOR FACTOR BEHIND THE CURRENT LEVEL OF FEAR WAS THE INCREASED ATTENTION AND PUBLIC CONCERN FOCUSED ON DIOXIN AS THE AGENT ORANGE HERBICIDE CONTROVERSY SPREAD ACROSS THE NATIONAL SCENE IN THE LATE 1970s. SYMPATHETIC TELEVISION REPORTS INFORMED THE PUBLIC THAT VIETNAM VETERANS WERE SUFFERING FROM DISEASES AND WERE FATHERING DEFORMED CHILDREN -- BOTH AT "UNUSUALLY LARGE" RATES -- AS A RESULT OF WARTIME EXPOSURE TO THE SMALL LEVELS OF DIOXIN CONTAINED IN THE HERBICIDE. IN ACTUAL FACT, THERE WAS AND STILL IS NO CREDIBLE EVIDENCE TO SUPPORT THESE ALLEGATIONS.

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THIS NOTWITHSTANDING, MANY AMERICANS ALREADY SYMPATHETIC TO OTHER PROBLEMS OUR VIETNAM VETERANS WERE ENDURING, REACTED WITH SHOCK AND OUTRAGE. AGENT ORANGE BECAME A RALLYING POINT FOR SOME VETERANS, AND ITS EMOTIONAL APPEAL WAS MAGNIFIED BY TELEVISION NEWS COVERAGE. DOCUMENTARIES WITH INFLAMMATORY TITLES LIKE "AGENT ORANGE: VIETNAM'S DEADLY FOG" AND "DIOXIN: IN SEARCH OF A KILLER" FURTHER STIRRED THE EMOTIONS.

THE PUBLIC ANXIETY IN MISSOURI HAS BEEN FURTHER FUELED BY LOCAL NEWS COVERAGE OF DIOXIN CONTAMINATION AT TIMES BEACH AND OTHER LOCATIONS. IN THIS CASE, IT'S CLEAR THAT SOME OF THE LOCAL NEWS MEDIA -- ESPECIALLY THE ST. LOUIS POST DISPATCH -- INDULGED IN "OVER-REPORTING" -- WHICH, IN MY OPINION, IS ONE OF JOURNALISM'S MOST COMMON SINS IN COVERING ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES. TIME MAGAZINE RECENTLY COINED THE PHRASE "WATER TORTURE JOURNALISM" TO DESCRIBE NEWS COVERAGE THAT ADDS ONE LITTLE FACT, HERE AND THERE, AND THEN GOES ON TO LENGTHILY REPEAT UNSUBSTANTIATED ALLEGATIONS.

TIME MUST HAVE HAD THE P-D IN MIND -- IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS, THE POST HAS RUN OVER 400 ARTICLES ON DIOXIN, MOST ON THE FRONT PAGE, NOT INCLUDING THE 48-PAGE SPECIAL DIOXIN SUPPLEMENT PUBLISHED LAST NOVEMBER.

ANOTHER PROBLEM WITH ENVIRONMENTAL REPORTING, AND ONE THAT HAS BEEN VERY EVIDENT IN LOCAL DIOXIN COVERAGE, IS THE USE OF INFLAMMATORY LANGUAGE. TERMS LIKE "DEADLY DIOXIN" AND "CANCER-CAUSING" DIOXIN WERE AND ARE FREQUENTLY USED.

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ALSO, NEWS ACCOUNTS COMMONLY INCLUDE THE STATEMENT THAT "DIOXIN'S LONG-TERM EFFECTS ON HUMANS ARE UNKNOWN." AS I POINTED OUT EARLIER, THIS IS SIMPLY NOT TRUE. INDEED, MUCH IS KNOWN ABOUT THE LONG-TERM EFFECTS ON HUMANS, AND SO FAR IT'S PRETTY REASSURING INFORMATION. SO WHY DOES THE MEDIA IGNORE IT?....I HONESTLY DON'T KNOW. THEY ARE CERTAINLY AWARE OF IT -- BECAUSE MANY OF US HAVE MADE THEM AWARE.

EARLY-ON IN THE MISSOURI STORY THEY WERE ALSO GUILTY OF CONSULTING A SMALL HANDFUL OF WHAT I CALL "RENEGADE SCIENTISTS." THESE WELL KNOWN INDUSTRY ANTAGONISTS HAVE BEEN MAKING A LIVING OUT OF EXPLOITING PUBLIC FEAR FOR YEARS. NEWS PEOPLE ARE TYPICALLY RELUCTANT TO GIVE WELL-RESPECTED SCIENTISTS A CHANCE TO REBUT RENEGADE ARGUMENTS, CHOOSING INSTEAD TO USE CHEMICAL COMPANY EXECUTIVES OR GOVERNMENT BUREAUCRATS, WITH THE ALL-BUT-OPEN IMPLICATION THAT THEIR MOTIVES AND THEIR CREDIBILITY ARE SUSPECT.

HOW CAN A JOURNALIST TELL WHO IS A "RESPECTED SCIENTIST," YOU MIGHT ASK? IT'S EASY. ASK THE SCIENTIST FOR THE SOURCE OF HIS INFORMATION. HAS HIS RESEARCH BEEN PEER-REVIEWED? HAS IT BEEN PUBLISHED IN A REPUTABLE TECHNICAL JOURNAL? HOW CAN A REPORTER FIND OUT WHAT THE "SCIENTIFIC" CONSENSUS IS? THAT'S A LITTLE HARDER -- BUT CERTAINLY DOABLE. RUN A COMPUTERIZED LITERATURE SEARCH OR, AT LEAST, CALL A FEW RANDOMLY CHOSEN HIGH-QUALITY UNIVERSITIES AND ASK TO SPEAK TO AN EXPERT ON THE SUBJECT, AND POP THE QUESTION. THE RESULT WILL USUALLY BE AN 80 PERCENT (OR BETTER) CONSENSUS. BUT JOURNALISTS DON'T LIKE

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TO DO THIS. INSTEAD, MANY SIMPLY SUGGEST THAT THE SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITY IS SPLIT -- THEY IMPLY INTO EQUAL HALVES -- ON THE DANGERS OF DIOXIN (OR WHATEVER THE CURRENT CONTROVERSY MIGHT BE) WITH ONE SIDE DOMINATED BY INDUSTRY SCIENTISTS AND THE OTHER BY ACADEMIA OR FEDERAL EXPERTS.

ANOTHER JOURNALISTIC FAILING IS THAT THEY HAVE NOT TRIED TO HELP THE PUBLIC UNDERSTAND THE REAL DANGER OF DIOXIN. FOR EXAMPLE, NEWS ACCOUNTS USUALLY INCLUDE THE PHRASE: "THE FEDERAL CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL HAS ADVISED THAT EXPOSURE TO DIOXIN AT LEVELS HIGHER THAN 1 PPB ARE HAZARDOUS." THESE SAME NEWS ACCOUNTS SELDOM BOTHER TO EXPLAIN HOW THIS MAGIC NUMBER WAS ARRIVED AT -- OR THAT IT APPLIES ONLY TO RESIDENTIAL AREAS.

FOR THE RECORD, HERE'S WHAT THE CDC DID. THEY WENT THROUGH A SERIES OF MATHEMATICAL CALCULATIONS AND, USING DIOXIN'S EFFECTS ON LABORATORY RATS AS THE BASIS, PROJECTED THAT IF A SMALL CHILD WERE TO EAT ONE GRAM OF SOIL CONTAINING A PART-PER-BILLION OF DIOXIN EVERY DAY FOR $6\frac{1}{2}$ YEARS, THE CHILD WOULD EVENTUALLY ACCUMULATE A LARGE ENOUGH DOSE TO RAISE HIS/HER RISK OF CANCER BY ONE ADDITIONAL CHANCE IN A MILLION.

PERHAPS THE WORST JOURNALISTIC SIN OF ALL IN ENVIRONMENTAL REPORTING -- AND CERTAINLY ONE THE LOCAL MEDIA HAVE COMMITTED IN THEIR LOCAL DIOXIN REPORTING -- IS A FAILURE TO TRY TO PUT THE DIOXIN RISK IN PERSPECTIVE. PEOPLE CAN BEST UNDERSTAND A RISK -- BE IT REAL OR ESTIMATED -- BY COMPARING IT WITH KNOWN RISKS THAT ARE FAMILIAR.

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LET'S DO IT HERE. THE SO-CALLED RISK TO HUMANS FROM EXPOSURE TO DIOXIN AT THE CDC'S 1 PPB LEVEL IS EQUIVALENT TO THAT OF SMOKING ONE CIGARETTE IN ONE'S LIFETIME, OR CROSSING A STREET ONE EXTRA TIME EVERY THREE YEARS, OR INCREASING THE NATIONAL SPEED LIMIT FROM 55 TO 55.003 MILES PER HOUR.

I DOUBT THAT MORE THAN A HANDFUL OF PEOPLE IN THIS TOWN TRULY UNDERSTANDS JUST HOW LOW THE DIOXIN RISK REALLY IS, AND I HAVE TO BELIEVE THAT MOST PEOPLE -- ESPECIALLY THOSE WHO MAY HAVE BEEN EXPOSED -- WOULD FIND SOME COMFORT IN KNOWING THIS INFORMATION. I SUBMIT THAT BY FAILING TO PUT THIS RISK INTO PROPER PERSPECTIVE, JOURNALISTS ALSO HAVE FAILED IN THEIR RESPONSIBILITY TO INFORM THE PUBLIC.

SEVERAL RECENT DECISIONS AFFECTING ENVIRONMENTAL LAWS AND REGULATORY INITIATIVES IN THIS COUNTRY HAVE BEEN ROOTED IN INACCURATE, INFLAMMATORY REPORTING, AND THE HYPE THAT COMES FROM OVER-REPORTING. AND WHILE OTHER FACTORS WERE CERTAINLY INVOLVED HERE, THE EPA DECISION TO BUY OUT TIMES BEACH WAS PROMPTED IN LARGE PART BY INFLAMMATORY REPORTING AND MEDIA HYPE -- RATHER THAN ACCEPTED SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE.

I HASTEN TO ADD THAT THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR BALANCED REPORTING ON ENVIRONMENTAL MATTERS AND, INDEED, THE BLAME FOR ONE-SIDED AND MISLEADING STORIES DOES NOT REST SOLELY WITH THE NEWS MEDIA. FEDERAL OFFICIALS, POLITICIANS, SPECIAL INTEREST GROUPS AND THE PLAINTIFF'S BAR ALL CONTRIBUTE, FROM TIME TO TIME, IN THEIR OWN WAYS -- BUT THOSE ARE STORIES FOR ANOTHER DAY.

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I'D BE REMISS IF I DIDN'T ALSO POINT OUT THAT INDUSTRY AND INDUSTRY'S PUBLIC RELATIONS PROFESSIONALS HAVE A MAJOR ROLE TO PLAY, AS WELL. ALL TOO OFTEN, WHEN THE MEDIA CALLS WITH TOUGH QUESTIONS, BUSINESSMEN ARE "UNAVAILABLE FOR COMMENT." AND WHEN THEY DO TALK, MANY OF THEM STONEWALL VITAL INFORMATION, TWIST THE FACTS AND, YES, SOME EVEN RESORT TO LYING. ANOTHER FAVORITE INDUSTRY PLOY -- WHICH, BY THE WAY, NEVER WORKS -- IS TO TRY TO BURY BAD NEWS AT THE BOTTOM OF THE NEWS RELEASE. THIS PRACTICE, KNOWN AS "SUGARCOATING," WAS ADDRESSED RECENTLY IN A WASHINGTON POST ARTICLE.

TO MAKE HIS CASE THAT CHICANERY IS ALIVE AND WELL IN CORPORATE AMERICA, THE REPORTER CITED THE LEAD PARAGRAPHS FROM TWO COMPANY PRESS RELEASES HE HAD JUST RECEIVED. I'LL CHANGE THE NAMES HERE, BUT THE TEXT IS VERBATIM:

"AJAX STEEL CORP. TODAY ANNOUNCED A SERIES OF MOVES DESIGNED TO INSURE THAT ITS STEEL SECTOR WILL CONTINUE AS A MAJOR FORCE IN WORLD STEEL MARKETS FOR THE BALANCE OF THE CENTURY AND BEYOND..." WOW -- THIS IS REALLY UPBEAT, RIGHT?

WRONG! BACK ON PAGE SIX, AS IT TURNS OUT, IS THE DISCLOSURE THAT AJAX IS ACTUALLY ELIMINATING 15,000 JOBS, PULLING OUT OF SEVERAL CITIES AND TAKING A STUNNING \$650 MILLION WRITE-OFF.

IN THE OTHER EXAMPLE -- "A & B JONES, THE RETAIL FURNITURE COMPANY LONG NOTED FOR ITS REPUTATION FOR QUALITY, STYLE AND TREND-SETTING FURNITURE, IS ONCE AGAIN TAKING THE LEAD IN THE FURNITURE INDUSTRY..."

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THIS ANNOUNCEMENT EVENTUALLY REVEALS THAT THE FURNITURE RETAILER IS "TAKING THE LEAD" BY CLOSING ITS DOWNTOWN STORE AND CONVERTING ITS OTHERS INTO SMALL INTERIOR DESIGN BOUTIQUES.

THE WASHINGTON POST REPORTER THEN WONDERS RHETORICALLY WHY COMPANIES PUT OUT SUCH "DISINGENUOUS DRIVEL" WHEN THEY MUST SURELY KNOW THAT NOT EVEN THE SMARMIEST RAG IS GOING TO PRINT IT THAT WAY. INDEED, WHY DO WE?

INDUSTRY NEEDS TO BE MORE FORTHRIGHT AND MORE AVAILABLE WHEN THE NEWS MEDIA CALLS. WHEN OUR COMPANIES HAVE CREATED A PROBLEM OR HAVE MADE A MISTAKE, WE SHOULD BITE THE BULLET AND ADMIT IT -- ANSWERING THE HARD QUESTIONS. AND WHEN APPROPRIATE, WE SHOULD GO AHEAD AND INITIATE THE INFORMATION WITHOUT WAITING TO BE ASKED.

TO BE SURE, SOME INDUSTRY LAWYERS WON'T LIKE THIS DEGREE OF OPENNESS. AND INDEED, IT MIGHT GET US SUED ONCE IN A WHILE BUT THAT'S THE RISK WE'RE GOING TO HAVE TO TAKE. WE CAN'T VERY WELL DEMAND ACCURACY AND FAIRNESS OF THE MEDIA IF WE'RE NOT WILLING TO PLAY AND BE PERCEIVED TO BE PLAYING BY THE SAME RULES, CAN WE? BELIEVE ME, IT WORKS. JOHNSON & JOHNSON GOT VERY HIGH MARKS, AND DESERVEDLY SO, FOR THE WAY IT HANDLED THE TYLENOL RECALL AND SO DID PROCTER & GAMBLE IN THE RELY TAMPON CASE.

I'D LIKE TO THINK THAT MY COMPANY -- MONSANTO -- IS BEING SIMILARLY GRADED FOR THE WAY WE'VE ANNOUNCED THE RESULTS OF DIOXIN TESTING AT A FEW OF OUR PLANT SITES IN RECENT MONTHS. IN MY EXPERIENCE WITH THIS ON-GOING NEGATIVE ISSUE, I HAVE FOUND THE NEWS MEDIA TO BE GENUINELY IMPRESSED WITH OUR CANDOR AND THE NEWS COVERAGE TO DATE HAS BEEN EXTREMELY FAIR AND BALANCED.

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SUCH A POLICY, IF FAITHFULLY PRACTICED, WILL ALSO HELP US REGAIN SOME MUCH NEEDED GOODWILL AND CORPORATE CREDIBILITY. I'M SURE I DON'T HAVE TO TELL YOU THAT INDUSTRY DOESN'T HAVE MUCH OF EITHER OF THESE VIRTUES IN THE BANK OF PUBLIC OPINION THESE DAYS.

SO, I URGE ALL OF YOU TO TAKE THE LEAD IN CONVINCING YOUR MANAGEMENTS AND YOUR SCIENTISTS OF THE NEED TO SPEAK OUT AND BE FORTHRIGHT. CHALLENGE HALF TRUTHS, SUPPORT SCIENTIFIC FACTS, WRITE LETTERS TO THE EDITOR, AND SCREAM FOUL WHEN YOU'RE MISQUOTED OR NOT GIVEN THE OPPORTUNITY TO RESPOND TO UNFAIR ACCUSATIONS.

AT THE SAME TIME, BE WILLING TO ADMIT PROBLEMS, TELL THE MEDIA AND THE PUBLIC OF YOUR MISTAKES AS WELL AS YOUR ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND PLEASE -- RESIST THE EFFORTS AND THE TEMPTATIONS TO SUGARCOAT BAD NEWS.

IN CLOSING, I'D LIKE TO SUGGEST THAT IF WE CAN DO THESE THINGS WELL AND CONSISTENTLY, THE PUBLIC WILL BE BETTER INFORMED, NEWS ACCOUNTS WILL BECOME MORE EVEN-HANDED, LESS HYPED, CORPORATE CREDIBILITY WILL BEGIN MAKING A COME-BACK AND HEY -- WE'LL ALL FEEL BETTER ABOUT OURSELVES WHEN WE GO HOME AT NIGHT AND TALK TO OUR KIDS ABOUT WHAT WE DID TODAY.

THANK YOU.

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