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PBB The Poison Puzzle

Reply to State Task Force Charges

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Gov. William G. Milliken's special task force on PBB says The Press has "sarcotized" its readers; "thanks to conclusions that have little or no basis in fact."

The baseless conclusions, however, seem to have been made by the task force in an eight-page, story-by-story criticism of a 13-part series on PBB by The Press.

The series really made no conclusions. The stories stand only as a 13,000-word collection of facts, views and theories on all sides of the issue. Statements from state and federal officials filled the largest amount of space.

The task force of four state officials responsible for the handling of the poisoning episode and Sen. John Weibman of Battle Creek assert that the series contains "rumor, speculation, half-truths and errors of fact."

The contents of the critique hardly match the boldness of the task force's cover statements, however. It challenges only two or three specific parts of the series. The rest of the critique essentially is a rehash of official statements (most of which the series included) which apparently are meant to refute things not in the series but which the officials read into it.

One accusation can be handled easily. The task force says: "B. Dale Ball, director of the Michigan Department of Agriculture, is characterized as having sought a lowered guideline level. The statement is completely false."

Steve Irish, a reporter for WTVH in Cadillac, however, says his station has film of Ball making the statement attributed to him in the series:

"We don't want any of this (PBB) in livestock if we can help it. That's why I'm going to Washington in an effort to have the tolerance lowered."

Ball since has changed his stance and says he opposes lowering it.

One objection warrants a correction by The Press. The series quoted a farmer as saying tests on his milk revealed "DDT, dieldrin, PCB's, things that are known to cause cancer in the right amounts." That was a statement on science that could have been checked and wasn't.

The pesticides research laboratory at Michigan State University says DDT and PCB's haven't

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been linked to cancer. There has been enough evidence to suspect that dieldrin might be a cancer-causing agent, the lab says.

Some officials have called the PBB episode the largest poisoning incident in the nation's history. It reportedly began about 21 months ago when Michigan Chemical Co. mistakenly shipped PBB to Michigan Farm Bureau Services which accidentally mixed it in animal feed supplement.

The task force criticizes The Press for saying PBB is contagious. The series never referred to the possibility that PBB, a fire-retardant chemical used in plastics, might be contagious.

The critique explains that some "clean" cattle have gotten PBB in their bodies when placed with contaminated herds because the barns haven't been cleaned properly or bad feed continues to be present. The series included those possibilities.

The state officials claim that the series often tied human illness to PBB. It never did. In one instance, the task force charges The Press with claiming patients of a Big Rapids osteopath are suffering from PBB poisoning.

Dr. David Salvati reported that he had diagnosed liver damage in 17 persons and theorized that the only thing all 17 had in common was that they had eaten farm products from contaminated animals.

The Press quoted Dr. Salvati as saying his tests cannot prove conclusively that the illnesses are a direct result of PBB consumption, but the evidence "strongly suggests a cause and effect relationship."

The officials make similar complaints about the presentation of farmers citing illness "as a result

of PBB poisoning."

The closest any farmer came to claiming such a link was when one said he had ear bleeding and other symptoms similar to his quarantined swine. "I won't say it's PBB," he said. "I don't know."

In a subsequent interview which appeared in the same story (the third one, on March 11), the farmer's doctor confirmed that he could make no positive diagnosis for PBB poisoning.

Sometimes the task force's refutation has little to do with the fact being questioned. The critique states that "the assertion is made in this article (the eighth on March 18) that meat with PBB above the federally-set guideline level easily can slip through the state's current surveillance system."

The critique explains how spot surveys have not revealed highly-contaminated meat at grocery counters (a fact included in the series). But it doesn't provide any information on why such meat could not get there. Mark Mason, the governor's special assistant on PBB and a task force member, admitted in an interview with The Press the day following the final series installment that it is possible that a person could buy a side of Michigan-tested beef that would contain PBB over the tolerance level.

"The article, (the 11th, on March 19) claims the state is exercising almost no control over dead livestock 'filled' with the chemical called PBB," the task force writes. Following was a lengthy explanation of why the state doesn't need to exercise strict control (information included in the Mason interview) but not refutation of the facts of The Press story.

The officials write that the second story of "The Poison Puzzle" series "goes to considerable lengths in suggesting that contaminated milk is being offered for sale in Michigan. However, continual state testing has shown that PBB is not being found in the Michigan milk supply."

True, the state hasn't been able to detect PBB in packaged milk in the grocery stores since June. But the state's Department of Agriculture Dairy Division head, Kenneth VanPatten, admits that milk with PBB is being collected and sold by Michigan dairies. That is the point about milk made by the series.

The governor's task force has failed to give any reasons why the series should not be considered accurate.