

Holes in the Brain

A peculiar, and not so sweet connection.

Last month I was preparing for a speech in Washington, D.C., on our relationship to "emerging contaminants." Emerging contaminants are toxic chemicals like nanoparticles, pharmaceuticals, and brominated fire retardants that start turning up in places like umbilical cord blood and fish. While the speech was on my mind, an e-mail arrived about a recent National Toxicology Program review of scientific studies on the artificial sweetener aspartame, which is in about 5,000 products under brand names such as NutraSweet and Equal. The review concluded that aspartame is a "multipotential carcinogen," meaning it causes numerous types of cancer. I poked about on the web a bit to find when we first had hints that aspartame causes cancer.



The story I found brought me full circle from toxics to the war on Iraq to home. In December 1965, a researcher at the pharmaceutical company G.D. Searle was testing aspartame as a possible ulcer drug when he accidentally discovered how sweet aspartame tastes. To be precise, 180 times sweeter than sugar, with no calories. One drawback is that aspartame is a third methanol which is transformed into the toxic formaldehyde and formic acid inside your body.

By spring 1967, Searle began safety tests that are necessary for Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approval of a food additive such as aspartame. By fall 1967 (when I arrived at University of Wisconsin), a biochemist at the university was conducting aspartame safety tests on seven infant monkeys. One died and five had grand mal seizures.

By spring 1971, neuroscientist Dr. John Olney (whose research on MSG was responsible for its removal from baby foods) told Searle his research showed aspartame was causing holes in the brains of infant mice.

In February 1973 Searle submitted 100 aspartame studies to the FDA and by March 1974 the FDA had approved aspartame for restricted use in dry foods. Dr. Olney and attorney Jim Turner (who had been key in the withdrawal of the artificial sweetener cyclamate from the market because it was a carcinogen) filed an objection to aspartame's approval. This triggered an FDA investigation of Searle's laboratory practices. The investigators found Searle's testing procedures full of inaccuracies and "manipulated" test data, and reported they "had never seen anything as bad as Searle's testing."

In 1976 the FDA requested the U.S. Attorney's office to begin grand jury proceedings to investigate whether indictments should be filed against Searle for "concealing material facts and making false statements" in aspartame safety tests. Searle's law firm promptly began job negotiations with Samuel Skinner, the U.S. attorney in charge of the investigation.

In March 1977 G.D. Searle hired a new CEO: Donald Rumsfeld, former secretary of defense under President Gerald Ford. Samuel Skinner joined Searle's law firm, and the statute of limitations ran out on the grand jury investigation.

In 1980 an FDA Public Board of Inquiry concluded that aspartame should not be approved pending further investigations of brain tumors. Three of the FDA's six in-house scientists reviewed the tumor studies and advised against aspartame approval.

In January 1981, Searle CEO Rumsfeld told a sales meeting he was going to "call in his chips" to get aspartame approved within the year. That same month, Ronald Reagan was sworn in as president with Rumsfeld part of Reagan's transition team. The team picked Dr. Arthur Hayes of the Defense Department to be the new FDA commissioner. Hayes' first official decision was to approve full use of aspartame in dry food products, overruling the FDA's Public Board of Inquiry and scientists. Hayes' last official act before he resigned over controversy about taking unauthorized General Foods jet rides, and before he joined Searle's public relations firm as a consultant, was to approve aspartame for use in beverages.

So no, aspartame isn't newly emerging as a carcinogen, and Rumsfeld's behavior as Searle CEO brings three thoughts to mind:

First, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld's leap over lack of WMD evidence, his own military's advice, and UN process to get President Bush's Iraq War underway is a well-practiced move.

Second, a child or soldier who dies in Iraq from a bomb and an adult who dies in the U.S. from aspartame-caused cancer share at least one person in common who contributed to their death.

Third, whenever politically positioned people, whether nationally or locally, regard law and evidence as mere hurdles to leap over to get what they want, it's our job as citizens to keep those laws in place, that evidence in the open, and those people in line.

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They have a few minor complaints but have generally found Wal-Mart to be as good a place to work as is available.

Wal-Mart offers more perks than the competition and their employees are fairly treated. With personal experience I can verify that the other stores I have worked for were neither different nor better. If someone is looking for a warm, fuzzy, benevolent place to work with lots of perks, retirement and other benefits, perhaps Greenwald can direct them to some. Unless he can, he needs to find something else to do. I know of no such places.

If you are fortunate enough to live near a Wal-Mart Superstore with groceries, you are twice blessed. No finer grocery store exists with the same quality products and low prices.

There is some good news that Greenwald and the other Wal-Mart bashers want to completely ignore. They forget the many people, no doubt millions, who benefit from Wal-Mart stores and products. I am sorry for displaced mom-and-pop stores but the benefit to Wal-Mart shoppers is by far the greater good. The quality and variety of Wal-Mart products is equal to or superior to the other stores I have mentioned, with much lower prices. These are the key words. Many people with limited incomes are able to purchase products that they otherwise could not afford. Greenwald does not consider them, which is typical of people who do not have to be concerned with tight budgets.

No doubt Wal-Mart will continue to be bashed for being good merchandisers, but that is the price they must pay for being number one.

Harv Hess
Eugene

REPUBLICAN DEBT

This Iraq War has cost us over \$300 billion so far. However, Bush and Cheney's friends (Halliburton and other companies) have made billions from this war. The oil companies made a record-breaking \$274 billion profit last year. So President Bush gives them a \$6 billion tax exemption.

The Republican Congress has allotted billions to pork-political projects, including a \$270 million Alaskan bridge that will reach 50 people. There's no effort to cut this pork to help our national debt.

While CEOs retire with \$33 million pensions, based on padded work records, workers have seen their retirement investments and medical insurance wiped out. The Republican Congress has passed laws to allow companies to scrap health insurance promised to employees and forbidden employees to sue to enforce retirement benefits.

Sixty percent of U.S. companies pay no income tax. Congress will pass a \$70 billion tax cut. The Republican-controlled House Agricultural Committee approved budget cuts — at the urging of the Bush White House — that would take food stamps from an estimated 300,000 people and cut off school lunches and breakfasts for 40,000 children.

"The fact is, our country is going broke," said Rep. John Boehner, R-Ohio. "We're spending money we don't have and passing it on to our kids, and at some point, somebody's got to pay. Enough is enough." Who's paying? Not the wealthy Republicans with their pub-

licly funded pork projects. No. The poor will pay. As will the kids who don't have food to eat.

Robert Rubinstein
Eugene

CANCER CUTS

As someone who has been touched by cancer as an American Cancer Society volunteer, I believe that investing in cancer research and programs should be a top national priority. That's why I was so disappointed to learn that Congress could cut cancer research funding by as much as \$100 million this year.

A cut in cancer funding could lead to delays in the development of new cancer-fighting drugs and treatments, screenings that detect cancer at its earliest stages, and programs that improve the quality of life of cancer patients. A funding cut would mark the first time in more than a decade that the federal government has reduced support for cancer research.

In September, 92 Senators and 280 Members of the House signed a letter supporting the Bush administration's goal to eliminate suffering and death due to cancer by the year 2015. With adequate funding, we can make cancer a disease people live with, rather than die from.

Thirty years ago a cancer diagnosis left many without hope. Today, 10 million Americans are survivors of the disease. Now Congress has the chance to ensure that there is enough money invested in research and programs to allow for far more progress in the future.

I urge my congressional delegation to oppose any cuts in cancer research and programs. Rather than reverse our progress in the war against cancer, Congress should give the gift of hope to cancer patients and their families this holiday season.

Valerie Pederson
Oakridge

VOTE FOR TYRANNY

In the Nov. 17 issue you failed to mention one of last week's most important political events: a vote by the U.S. Senate to strip the right of habeas corpus from so-called "enemy combatants." Habeas corpus is the right that prohibits the government from imprisoning individuals (literally, "holding the body") without charge.

Residents of Oregon should know how their senators voted on this critical bill, which in effect repealed for a certain class of persons a right that has been considered the cornerstone of a free society since it first appeared in the Magna Carta of 1215.

To my utter disgust, Ron Wyden was one of five Democrats whose support for the bill allowed its passage. As far as I am concerned, this vote alone — so fundamental is this right to the structure of our civil society — is the end of whatever claim Wyden might make to be a progressive candidate.

I will never again support him for reelection, and I strongly urge your readers to do the same. Though I would hate to lose Wyden's seat to a Republican, this regressive vote for tyranny reveals a deficiency of judgment that should be unacceptable.

Kudos to Senator Gordon Smith for voting against his party and against this bill.

Timothy M. Shaw
Eugene

