

# Salem sulfite death raises pesticide concerns

by Robert Lothian

The death of an asthmatic Salem girl after she ate sulfite-treated lettuce and guacamole in a Salem restaurant has once again focussed public attention on the use of potentially dangerous chemicals.

In response to the death of 10-year-old Medaya Hester McPike, the Oregon Health Division now requires restaurants that use sulfite-treated produce to post warning notices.

In addition, Rep. Ron Wyden has introduced a bill that would ban altogether the use of sulfite preservatives to treat fresh fruits and vegetables.

Co-sponsor of the bill, Sen. Albert Gore, D.-Tenn., said that at least five deaths in the last three years have been linked with sulfites. Gore and Wyden sent a letter to the Food and Drug Administration asking for an interim ban pending Congressional action.

Sulfite preservatives are among hundreds of chemical substances used on food products, some safe, some not so safe.

In 1982, a National Resources Defense Council study of chemicals on produce in San Francisco area supermarkets came up with some interesting results: strawberries had been doused with 15 different pesticides, carrots 11, oranges 10 and lettuce 4, "including known carcinogens," or cancer-causing substances.

Pesticides make life easier, according to chemical manufacturers, but only at the risk of human health in the interest of profits, say critics, who accuse manufacturers of flooding the environment with inadequately tested and dangerous chemicals.

Two experts criticized the use of chemicals on food and in the urban environment in Portland recently.

Maura Doherty, an industrial hygienist with the state of Oregon, addressed the 50th anniversary meeting of the East Multnomah Soil and Water Conservation District board.

She reported the results of her 1983 study of seven Portland spray programs conducted by four municipal agencies — the Portland Parks Dept., the Portland School District, Multnomah County Vector Control, and the State Highway Dept.

"City residents are subject to pesticide exposure repeatedly during the year, without notification, and without any comprehensive planning on the part of the city," said Doherty. "In addition," she continued, "public employees are not systematically informed of the hazards of the pesticides they spray."

According to Doherty, the four municipal agencies used a total of 42 chemicals: 21 herbicides, 12 insecticides and 9 fungicides. She found that all schoolyards within the city are regularly doused with chemicals that haven't been tested adequately, and that many of the 29 pesticides used by the Parks Dept. also lacked adequate testing for long-term health effects.

Some chemicals used in the city are known to be dangerous, according to Doherty. Benlate, for instance, a fungicide commonly used on the city's roses, can cause mutations and a decrease in sperm production in exposed animals, she said. Pregnant women should not use it, she continued, but parks employees often are not warned of the danger. Other chemicals used in the city spray programs can cause cancer, birth defects and spontaneous abortions, said Doherty.

Both the Parks Dept. and the School District lacked pesticide spray plans and use reports. That makes it hard for the public to know what it's being exposed to, said Doherty. Multnomah County Vector Control does keep good records of its insecticide spray program, however, she said.

Dr. Mary O'Brien, with the Northwest Coalition for Alternatives to Pesticides, spoke at a conference on

safety of the food supply at Portland State University.

Of the approximately 2 billion pounds of pesticides used in the world today, she said, about half are used on produce. But only about 20 percent have been tested for their ability to cause cancer, "even less for birth defects and genetic damage," though a 1972 law requires such testing, according to O'Brien.

"The Environmental Protection Agency is not doing its job," she charged.

The few tests that are conducted are often compromised by shoddy methods, said O'Brien. Testing becomes a rubber stamp process where chemical companies seek to get their

products past the E.P.A. the easiest way possible, she said.

One danger is the possibility of long-term chronic health problems that, ironically, can't be traced to the offending chemical(s). "If, in effect, your immune system is being damaged by a certain pesticide, you have no way to know whether those two extra colds a year are because of that," she said.

Both speakers said that bureaucratic foot-dragging on testing and enforcement compounds the problem.

In Oregon, for instance, before the recent tragic sulfite-related death, state officials failed to act on three separate requests from the federal government that restaurants be re-

quired to post sulfite warnings. Sulfites did not seem a high priority because they seem to affect only a small number of allergic people, was the answer given by the administrator of the Oregon Health Division.

But had the state acted sooner, Medaya Hester McPike might still be alive.

An alternative to pesticide and chemical poisoning, say Doherty, O'Brien and others concerned about it, is a requirement that those using chemicals post notices and keep records, whether in restaurants, on roses, street trees, in parks, schoolgrounds, along roadsides, crops — wherever contact with people or animals is a possibility.

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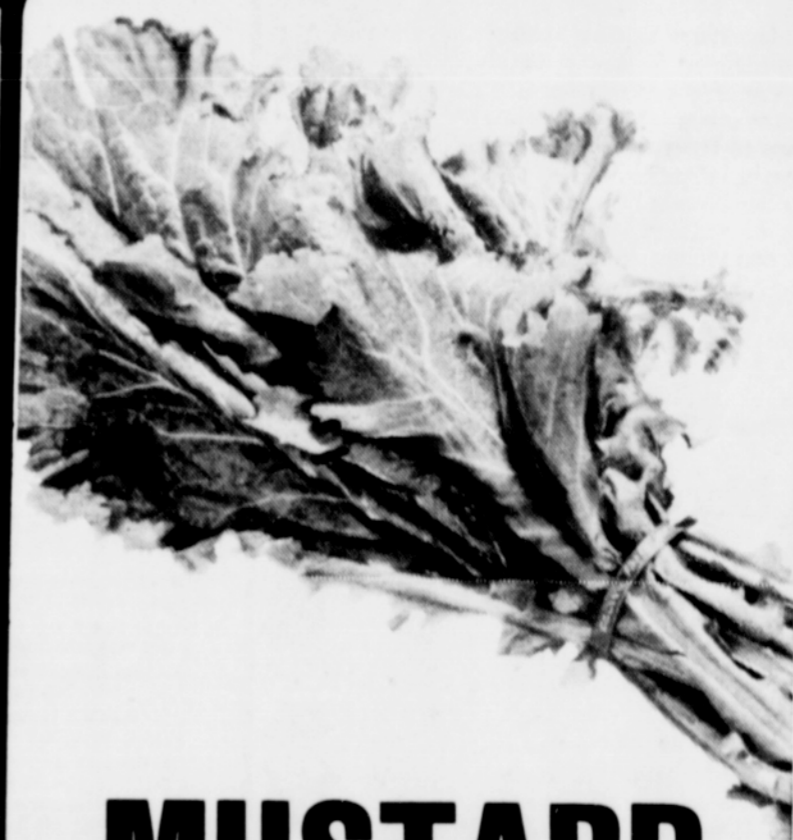


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