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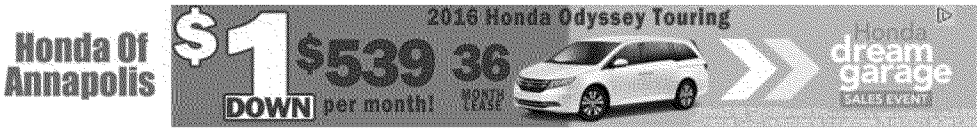

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I debunk junk science and flawed public policy..

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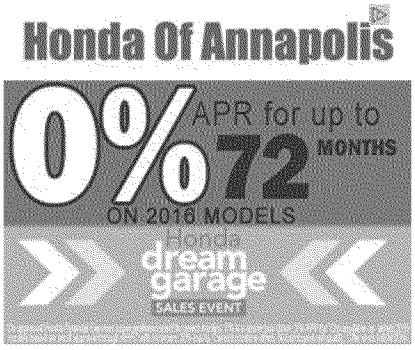
A UN Agency That Should Be Headed For Its Own Last 'Roundup'

Recent misjudgments on two herbicides show that the WHO's International Agency on Research in Cancer operates within a flawed paradigm, has become an anachronism, and is no longer needed.



In March I wrote about the travesty of the International Agency on Research in Cancer's four-day review of glyphosate (the active ingredient in Roundup herbicides), which resulted in its classification as a probable carcinogen—an opinion that flies in the face of reviews by regulatory agencies around the world. Since then, several regulatory agencies highly knowledgeable about glyphosate have made statements that support the chemical's safety. That isn't the only controversial (read: wrong-headed) herbicide decision to come from IARC recently: They also screwed up on classifying 2,4-dichlorophenoxyacetic acid, commonly known as 2,4-D.

It's no wonder that consumers get confused about what to believe. It's bad enough that they get bombarded with information on Internet blogs by ignoramuses, but now they are confronted by contradictory opinions from a veritable alphabet-soup of organizations, such as the Joint Meeting on Pesticide Residues (JMPR, jointly administered by the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization and World Health Organization), International Agency for Research in Cancer (IARC, another WHO organization), Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and other worldwide regulatory agencies. The reality is that the potential for evaluating the real risk of

chemicals to consumers should be evaluated by bona fide regulators–even though they are themselves sometimes overzealous–rather than a group like IARC.

Well, IARC is back! Earlier this month, it placed 2,4-D in the category 2B, a "possible human carcinogen." The IARC earlier this year classified glyphosate as 2A, a "probable carcinogen." In contrast with these conclusions, which some would consider a serious warning about using these chemicals, the U.S. EPA had previously considered 2,4-D "not classifiable" as to human carcinogenicity and glyphosate class E, non-carcinogenic.

Moreover, Dr. Julie Goodman, an epidemiologist, board certified toxicologist and consultant to the industry 2,4-D Research Task Force, who attended this month's IARC meeting on 2,4-D, made this observation:

> This ranking does not mean that 2,4-D causes or is even likely to cause cancer in people. IARC ranks substances based on potential hazards, but it is important to look at how they are used [in order] to assess real-world risk. IARC has assigned its 2B grouping to many other common products including aloe vera, coffee and pickled vegetables.

Why the discrepancies? The competence of the panelists? A flawed process? A fear-mongering tendency at IARC?

The fact is that the IARC panelists don't get to examine all the available data. They don't see the dossiers submitted to regulatory authorities. They don't look at the conclusions of the professional regulators but meet for a four-day sojourn in France to consider a cherry-picked set of data from the published literature.

By stating that the classification of glyphosate as a "probable carcinogen" should not affect the herbicide's use on home lawns and gardens, the IARC caused widespread confusion. Some municipalities questioned the safety of the use of glyphosate in parks, along roadways and in other public spaces. California's Prop 65 mandates that glyphosate now be labeled as a carcinogen on every can purchased for home use, and France wants to put Roundup behind lock-and-key in retail stores.

IARC, which celebrates its 50th birthday this year, was founded in 1965 with a mission to promote international collaboration in cancer research.

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This was before the establishment of the EPA and many other environmental regulatory agencies, so at that time IARC's role was more relevant. Its approach was better than nothing at its inception but it has been eclipsed by the greater thoroughness of regulatory agencies that now review pesticides routinely.

It is past time to review how–and whether–IARC fits in the regulatory landscape. IARC claims that its monographs program is important, with international expert working groups evaluating the evidence of the carcinogenicity of specific agents. However, its approach ignores the fundamental concept of risk-assessment: that risk is a function of both *hazard* and *exposure*. While such basic hazard assessments such as those done by IARC are relevant, they must be conducted with access to all available data and must be considered in the context of exposure. Yet IARC specifically ignores the total weight of evidence on the agents they review and skips over any meaningful assessment of exposure. In the 21st century, such an approach is inconceivable. Moreover, if IARC selects panelists the way other UN groups operate, it employs a kind of international "affirmative action" approach that regards competence less important than country of origin and gender.

Even within WHO, IARC is confusingly redundant. The Joint Meeting on Pesticide Residues (JMPR) is responsible for reviewing pesticides and has been doing so since 1963. It last reviewed glyphosate in 2011 and concluded that the chemical is unlikely to pose a health risk. In order to reconcile the conflicting positions of JMPR and IARC, JMPR has created an ad hoc expert taskforce that will review and compare the publications considered by IARC and JMPR and determine whether any relevant data have been omitted from the deliberations of either group. The report is supposed to be submitted by the end of this month.

The panel will likely not draw conclusions about the carcinogenicity of any chemical but might well call for another full review by JMPR. A far better outcome would be to conclude that we don't need multiple, conflicting opinions on the same issues, and that IARC should become history. Otherwise, WHO will find itself still mired in a situation similar to the classic Abbott and Costello farce, "Who's on first?"

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