

Summary & Comments on Meeting with Health Canada

Date: Wednesday, February 25, 2015

Place: Brooke Claxton Building, Tunney's Pasture, Ottawa

Attendees: Health Canada
Dr. William Yan, Director for Bureau of Nutritional Sciences
Luc Bourbonniere, Section Head for Novel Foods in the Evaluation Division

Ministry of Health
Nik Zylstra, Senior Policy Advisor

Kids Right To Know
Rachel Parent, Lead and Spokesperson
Gen Acuna, Communications Manager

Canadian Biotechnology Action Network
Lucy Sharratt, Meeting Technical Support for Kids Right To Know

Author: Summary & Comments by Rachel Parent

Topics Covered

- Safety Assessment
 - Labeling
 - GM Apple
 - Pesticides
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Safety Assessment

1. Health Canada confirmed that their safety assessment process for determining food safety does **not** involve performing any kind of test on their part.

Dr Yan: "We review the data that is given to us by the company...The product is being proposed by the company. It's up to them to demonstrate the safety."

2. Health Canada is supposed to make sure there are no concerns about the safety assessment and that there are no health risks associated with the consumption of the GMO food. After I had some time to really think about what I learned at that meeting, some new thoughts occurred to me:

- a. Health Canada says it reviews internationally published studies, but I don't feel as if they're taking the identified risks seriously enough. They seem to want proof that GMOs are not safe, instead of them ensuring GMOS ARE safe. One example was about the study by the University of Sherbrooke that found Bt (insecticide used with GMO crops) in the blood of fetuses. Health Canada reviewed the study, but:...

Mr Bourbonniere: "The Sherbrooke study didn't say the foods were not safe. It just said we may have detected something in the blood of pregnant women, but it didn't imply there was any safety issue."

Their toxicologist didn't agree with the techniques used and therefore couldn't draw any new conclusions or questions about GMOs. So they didn't change their opinion and that was the end of it!

Personally, if there was a study that said there was even a possibility of a widely used insecticide found in the blood of unborn fetuses, I would be extremely concerned and think there was a health risk! I would have lots of questions and want to see more tests done to prove 100% health and safety!

- b. They also cannot deeply look into which studies are valid or not. Dr Yan explained to me that there are always new studies, so it's hard for them to determine which studies are the ones that are valid enough to look into further. He said they simply do not have enough staff to look deeply into every single paper/study.
- c. Health Canada indicated that the studies provided by the companies in the safety assessments are not peer reviewed, and one of the explanations provided by Dr. Yan was:

“Some of the data is actually proprietary data. They invest millions of dollars to develop their crop, so they’re not going to divulge it to anyone else to test the product.”

Wouldn't Health Canada be the safest place in the country for this information to be and for their products to be tested? When it comes to assessing safety, shouldn't an unbiased, third party who has nothing to gain from the success or failure of the product, be the ones doing the tests? Also, why is protecting the company's secret data more important than protecting our health?

Labeling

Health Canada's position on GMO labeling is that it is not a health and safety issue; therefore it is not within their mandate. Dr Yan did mention that this is an issue that would fall into the jurisdiction of the CFIA. However, he then said that they probably wouldn't do it anyway.

Dr Yan: “Non health and safety labeling is really under the jurisdiction of the CFIA (Canadian Food Inspection Agency)...CFIA does have a mandate to make sure that all non health and safety labels meet the standards. I don't think you're going to see the CFIA have the mandate to tell everyone they have to label something GM or non GM.”

This left me feeling confused. First I thought it would be Health Canada's job to decide on mandatory GMO labeling. Now Health Canada is telling me it's CFIA's job, but that CFIA probably wouldn't do it anyway?

So I looked into it. The CFIA is supposed to require labeling of GM foods. Under the *Food and Drug Regulations*, food labels are to show a list of **all**

ingredients and a description of **any components** of the ingredients. It seems obvious to me that if an ingredient is made in a way that can't be created in nature, it is a unique ingredient in its own right, and we have a right to know about unique ingredients.

Mr. Yan agreed about the right to know. I asked him if he would like to know and choose the food that he's eating.

Dr Yan: "My personal opinion is yes. Freedom of choice is always good. But does Health Canada have the mandate to require mandatory GMO labeling? The answer is no, because Health Canada is strictly about health and safety...Whether a product is labelled GM or non-GM, all we do is make sure there's a standard available in Canada that allows people to do it. With a standard, the key thing is the CFIA can now go out there and verify every one of those claims."

So it looks like to me like the next conversation we need is to talk with CFIA to understand how they label ingredients.

The GM Apple

At the time of this meeting, the Arctic Apple had been recently approved by the US FDA but not yet by Health Canada. So I asked them if the fact that the president of Okanagan Specialty Fruits wanted this approved in Canada by April made them feel rushed in any way. They said "no", that this wasn't a race and that the science would dictate the timeline.

On March 20th, less than a month after my meeting, they had approved the genetically modified Arctic Apple.

Pesticides

Weeds have become resistant to Glyphosate, so now new crops are being introduced that are resistant to 2,4-D, one of the ingredients used in Agent Orange during the Vietnam War. So I asked them if there is any reason to believe that weeds won't eventually become resistant to 2,4-D?

Mr. Bourbonniere said that it was an excellent question and directed me to the CFIA for environmental assessment of GM crops and the PMRA (Pest Management Regulatory Agency) who do the assessment of the pesticides.

My take away thoughts:

1. I've learned that the agency with the authority to make mandatory GMO labeling is the CFIA. So it looks like that's the next office I'll be going to the next time I'm in Ottawa!
2. Health Canada is very limited in resources and in the way they assess the risk on whether something is safe or healthy. They claim that they use science to determine health and safety, yet the science and processes they use for looking at the studies seem to be very limited. They also have no plans or it seemed, interest, in updating their scope of their assessment.
3. As we all just witnessed with the GM apple, the science in food technology is advancing more and more everyday, and yet the independent science that our food regulators are using to help keep us safe, is not.