Debate continues on recombinant bovine somatotropin

Sir—I write to correct factual errors in the correspondence of Eric Brunner and Erik Millstone (July 3, p 71) regarding trial data on Monsanto’s recombinant bovine somatotropin. They state “official regulatory authorities accepted the manufacturer’s unpublished analysis”. In both the European Union and the USA, regulatory authorities did their own analysis of the mastitis data from Monsanto research trials in addition to the analyses by Monsanto Company. These analyses were in agreement and are a matter of public record.1,2

They further state, “We previously identified the shortcomings in this analysis, and did our own, but were unable to publish it because the company concerned withheld consent. Here the peer-review process was compromised”. In fact, the peer-review process revealed that Brunner and Millstone were attempting to publish results from trials they did not conduct. These results were fully published in the peer-review journal, Dairy Science by the scientists who actually did the trials.3

After approval of bovine somatotropin in the USA, a postapproval monitoring programme assessed mastitis incidence in the US dairy industry through three separate approaches, including adverse experience reports, incidence of discarded milk due to antibiotic contamination, and actual mastitis incidence in commercial dairy herds. The results from these studies were presented in two public hearings chaired by the Centre for Veterinary Medicine Advisory Committee. The results showed that mastitis incidence in herds treated with bovine somatotropin was easily manageable and did not pose a risk to human health.

The bottom line is that the incidence of mastitis in herds treated with bovine somatotropin has been evaluated in many peer-reviewed publications, by independent regulatory authorities, and in public hearings. The claim by Brunner and Millstone that “the peer-review process was compromised” simply has no merit.

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Health risks of genetically modified foods

Sir—Your May 29 editorial1 about the health risks of genetically modified (GM) food was apposite and addresses some of the important medical issues vigorously. It beggars belief that “badly designed, poorly carried out, inaccurately interpreted experiments” could have perpetuated such profound public debate for almost a year.

Regrettably, among the correspondents who responded to the editorial, Peter Lachman (July 3, p 69)2 accused you of factual inaccuracy, and it seems pertinent to remind him of the actual sequence of events. The Scottish Crop Research Institute (SCRI) did not initiate a study into GM potatoes. The research proposal for this “entirely sensible study” was, in fact, initiated by Susan Bardocz and Arpad Pusztai, written and submitted from the Rowett with the help of SCRI and Durham University scientists and coordinated by Pusztai.

Your editorial correctly notes that not all the facts were in the possession of the Royal Society. Thus, it is difficult to understand how they could deduce that the GM-potato experiments were “badly designed and poorly carried out” from an internal report by Pusztai that contained no such details. The Royal Society had never considered, or even asked for, a copy of the original research proposal of 1998. This omission was further compounded by the Royal Society’s unwillingness to take up Pusztai’s offer of full cooperation. Moreover, as crucial details of the histological findings were never divulged to them, it is more than perplexing that the Royal Society’s unnamed experts were so emphatic in their condemnation of the GM-potato experiments.

The unsolicited report of the Royal Society, produced by clandestine “peer review”, is deprecable, because many influential committees are redolent with advisers linked to biotechnology companies. The commercial precondition that impedes scientific debate is well illustrated by the experience of Eric Brunner and Erik Millstone. We strongly commend their support for openness in the regulatory process for new foods.

After the US Food and Drug Administration’s (FDA) and various biotechnology companies’ exhaustive safety studies, only one publication on feeding GM soya to animals has been published up to the beginning of 1999. Lachmann claims that “there is no experimental evidence or any plausible mechanism by which the process of genetic modification can make plants hazardous to human beings”, although it now seems that the FDA has overriden its own safety experts. It would be helpful if such authoritative opinions were supported by published results of biological, nutritional, and immunological testing with mammals before introduction into the human diet.

Scant attention has been given to people with abnormal digestion as a result of chronic gastrointestinal disease. The widespread mucosal accessibility to food viral DNA, a hot spot of DNA enhancement of intercurrent viral infection. Similarly, in countries where HIV-1 infection is endemic, the assumption that a viral component of GM food is harmless may be misplaced.

Few would question the well meaning sentiments of your correspondents but other equally valid opinions do not agree with the view that the GM route is the only salvation for mankind. We hope that your correspondents are correct about the health prospects of the millions of Americans and Chinese who have been consuming untested but assuredly “safe” GM food for years. In the UK, nobody can be completely certain whether or not they have consumed GM foods and overseas consumers cannot be declared unafected until chronic symptoms are identified, collated, and published.

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