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Let's Keep Monsanto Out of Our Milk

By Michael Hansen, PhD and David Wallinga, M.D.

The recent announcement by Kroger stores to prohibit the genetically engineered growth hormone rbST (also known as rbGH) from its private label milk brand is part of a nationwide trend among dairy processors, retailers and farmers. Starbucks, Tillamook, Safeway and Chipotle Restaurants have already begun to discontinue the hormone and California Dairies, Inc., which produces nearly 10 percent of the nation's milk, announced it went rbST-free August 1.

Each of these companies affirms that the chief impetus for its actions comes from rising consumer demand for hormone-free dairy products. Those consumers cite legitimate health concerns, including increased cancer risks and antibiotic resistance.

Facing dwindling sales of rbGH, Monsanto, its sole manufacturer, is trying to thwart informed consumer choice by pressuring the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and Federal Trade Commission (FTC) to restrict labeling of such products as rbGH-free. Monsanto claims there are no differences in the milk and that consumers are somehow "misled" by these labels.

Of course, consumers know exactly what "rbGH-free" means, just as they recognize the meaning of "No preservatives," "No artificial colors" and "No artificial flavors." These labels are important tools consumers use to make educated choices about products they buy, including additional labeling about how animals are treated in meat, egg and dairy production.

Regardless of the claims of Monsanto and its supporters, there are significant differences in rbGH-treated cows and their milk. Treated cows experience higher rates of 16 harmful medical conditions, including pregnancy problems, diarrhea and mastitis, which Monsanto's own package insert acknowledges. Virtually every animal protection agency in the country, including the Humane Society of the United States and Humane Farming Association, criticizes use of this synthetic hormone.

Elevated mastitis rates lead to increased treatment with antibiotics. Bacteria resistant to these antibiotics may pass into humans through milk, air, water or soil, or through ground meat, increasing antibiotic resistance. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, overuse of agricultural antibiotics is a significant contributor to food-borne, antibiotic-resistant infections in humans,

a multi-billion dollar problem in the United States.

There is also no doubt that rbGH use in cows increases the level in cows' milk of another growth hormone found in both cows and humans, IGF-1. While a certain level of IGF-1 is needed for normal development and daily functioning, elevated levels are strongly implicated with increased risk of breast, prostate, colon and other cancers. Advocates of rbGH claim that the amount of IGF-1 taken in from dairy products is not hazardous, but numerous scientists believe that even small amounts of additional hormone exposure can be significant. It's simply common sense to avoid a higher risk of getting cancer when the source of that risk is completely unnecessary.

Government leaders, scientists and farmers alike criticized the FDA's controversial decision to approve rbGH in 1993. In contrast, most industrialized nations of the world, including Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and all 25 members of the European Union, have disallowed its use. The Codex Alimentarius, the United Nations' main food safety body, twice decided that it could not endorse the safety of rbGH for human health.

Hospitals across the country are also taking action. Health Care Without Harm, an international coalition of over 440 healthcare and public health organizations dedicated to improving health and safety in hospitals, formally declared its opposition to rbGH in 2005. Since then, leading hospitals and hospital systems, such as Catholic Healthcare West, the largest Catholic healthcare system in the country, have begun purchasing rbGH-free dairy products.

Monsanto's attempt to pressure the FDA and FTC to restrict rbGH-free labeling is a self-serving attempt to save their falling profits. We need our government to reject this assault on the right of businesses to inform consumers and the right of all citizens to make informed choices about what they eat. ■

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