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. HEADLINES: .

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CIGARETTE SCIENCE AT JOHNS HOPKINS

As the scientific evidence piles up, linking chemical exposures to serious human diseases, many chemical-dependent industries, such as pesticide purveyors, are searching for a strategy to buy themselves some time, to put off the inevitable. They needn't look far. The tobacco industry has demonstrated that 40 years of scientific bad news can be deflected and neutralized with relative ease. Roughly half-a-million Americans die each year from tobacco-related illnesses, and this assessment is not disputed by the federal government, or by thousands of scientific researchers and physicians, or by the nation's mainstream medical and health organizations. Yet the tobacco corporations have

successfully maintained their privilege of selling a product that kills 10% of everyone who uses it as directed. What is the secret of such success?

A key component of the tobacco strategy is scientific research, funded by the Tobacco Industry Research Committee, which was formed in 1954 and later was renamed the Council for Tobacco Research.[1] Scientific research sponsored by the Council has served to create and maintain a "scientific controversy" surrounding questions of tobacco and health. The Council has funded studies of questions such as, Do some people have a genetic predisposition to cancer? Scientific controversy about tobacco-and-health gives the tobacco industry "plausible deniability" (a phrase made famous by Richard Nixon in another context). Scientific controversy allows the tobacco industry to insist that the case against their product is not conclusive. And it gives tobacco corporation executives the wiggle room they need--to deny that they are cut from the same cloth as drug dealers and murderers. For example, an official of the Tobacco Institute (an industry trade organization) said in 1987 --33 years after the American College of Surgeons identified smoking as a major cause of lung cancer --"Smoking may cause illness; it may not. We don't know and we don't think anybody knows." [2]

We call this phenomenon "cigarette science." Cigarette science is scientific study that serves the needs of a particular industry that finds itself beset by scientific bad news. One such industry is the pesticide trade.

The pesticide corporations have formed their own cigarette-science group called RISE (Responsible Industry for a Sound Environment). RISE is made up of executives from companies

like Monsanto, Sandoz Agro, DowElanco, Dupont Agricultural Products, The Scotts Company, and other pesticide manufacturers, formulators, and distributors.

The issue that has RISE's members worried is multiple chemical sensitivity, or MCS. MCS is an adverse reaction to low levels of many different chemicals with symptoms that range from sniffles to coma. Typical symptoms include irritability, insomnia, difficulty concentrating, memory trouble, daytime grogginess, chronic fatigue, headache, joint pain, muscle pain, abdominal pain, constipation, and ringing in the ears. In sum, for an MCS patient, life is hell. MCS afflicts 10% to 15% of the American public, and appears to be increasing, according to a publication of the American Chemical Society.[3] Pesticides and solvents are the chemicals mentioned most often as causes of MCS. For example, a recent article in ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH PERSPECTIVES (a scientific journal published by the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, a federal agency) says MCS is a "syndrome with onset related to an environmental exposure, MOST COMMONLY A SOLVENT OR PESTICIDE. [Emphasis added.] After the initial exposure, individuals become sensitive to low-level chemical exposures with symptoms involving more than one organ system. Though this syndrome was described four decades ago, it remains highly controversial." [4] Keeping MCS controversial is a key task of the cigarette-science activities of RISE. So long as MCS is surrounded by scientific controversy, the pesticide industry has wiggle room to make statements such as this recent one by RISE regarding MCS: "There is no scientific or documented evidence that pesticide application when used in accordance with label instruction has caused harm to human health." [5]

RISE's 1995-96 STRATEGIC PLAN (provided to us by the MCS advocacy

group, MCS Referral & Resources [phone: (410) 448-3319])

describes 4 main objectives. Objective #3 is "To promote the use of industry products as valuable pest management tools to enhance the quality of life and the environment." For achieving Objective #3, the RISE STRATEGIC PLAN identifies two "tactics" to be used by its "Communications Committee:" First, "Host forum for industry user groups that are taking positive pesticide messages to schools." And, second, "Conduct two 'MCS' phenomena seminars."

On September 9, 1995, RISE sponsored a seminar on MCS. One of the speakers was Suellen W. Pirages, managing director of a brand new organization, the Environmental Sensitivities Research Institute (ESRI). ESRI is a new cigarette-science institute funded by chemical-dependent corporations "to 'proactively' respond to the rising number of" MCS cases.[6] Notice how the name of the institute shifts the problem from one of 'multiple CHEMICAL sensitivities' to one of 'ENVIRONMENTAL sensitivities.' The problem isn't chemicals, it's the environment. Executive director and founder of ESRI is Ronald R. Gots, who openly scoffs at MCS patients and the physicians who treat them. For example, Dr. Gots has said MCS is "a peculiar manifestation of our technophobic and chemophobic society." [7] In other words, MCS patients aren't really sick --they're just irrationally frightened by technology and chemicals.

Dr. Gots wears another hat, as director of the National Medical Advisory Service (NMAS), which provides expert witnesses to attorneys defending corporations in product liability lawsuits. ESRI and NMAS are essentially indistinguishable; they share the same offices and have the same fax number; Dr. Gots heads them both. ESRI and NMAS promote the same viewpoint toward MCS: it is

an imaginary or psychological phenomenon, not an illness, so it couldn't be caused by chemicals. For example, on September 15, 1995, Dr. Gots testified on behalf of a corporate defendant in a lawsuit, saying under oath, "The MCS theory has been subjected to peer review evaluation and it has generally been rejected as 'junk science.'" [8]

Dr. Gots himself has had some recent work subjected to review by one of his peers, and it was found wanting. His recent book, TOXIC RISKS: SCIENCE, REGULATION AND PERCEPTION was thoroughly trashed by a reviewer in the JOURNAL OF OCCUPATIONAL MEDICINE--an industry-dominated journal. Dr. Gots's book was described as "of little value to public health professionals and scientists" and "replete with sweeping generalizations, overstatements, and exaggerations." [9]

Despite the obvious anti-MCS bias of Dr. Gots and his anti-MCS organizations, a respected university and the federal government are now allowing themselves to become a vehicle for Dr. Gots's political agenda. October 30 through Nov. 1, Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore --one of the nation's top research institutions, particularly in public health --in conjunction with NIOSH [National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health, a federal agency] --is co-sponsoring a symposium with Dr. Gots's National Medical Advisory Service, assisted by the staff of the Environmental Sensitivities Research Institute. The symposium is called "Multiple Chemical Sensitivities: State-of-the-Science Symposium." As you might expect from a group that doesn't believe there is any valid science supporting diagnoses of MCS, the symposium is heavily weighted in favor of pro-industry, anti-consumer, anti-MCS-patient viewpoints. No attempt is being made by conference organizers to include or accommodate MCS

patients.

A ticket to the conference costs \$625, and no scholarships are being offered to MCS patients, so their viewpoints on their illness will be missing from the conference. The viewpoint of the pesticide, carpet, perfume, and chemical industries --as represented by Dr. Gots and his colleagues --will receive a stamp of approval from NIOSH and from one of the nation's most prestigious universities. Thus does a major university slide into a role as provider of a public relations platform, and cover, for cigarette scientists promoting the anti-scientific agenda of the pesticide and petrochemical industries.

In the Baltimore area, MCS sufferers and people concerned about the integrity of science are outraged by Johns Hopkins University's capitulation to chemical-dependent industries, and they are planning a protest outside the OMNI-Inner Harbor Hotel in Baltimore at 8:30 a.m. October 30th. In honor of Halloween, organizers of the protest are urging MCS patients to come dressed as "An MCS Patient's Worst Nightmare --an anti-MCS witness in a white lab coat masquerading as an unbiased MCS researcher."

In contrast to the anti-MCS bias dominating the conference sponsored by Johns Hopkins and its friends in the pesticide industry, some excellent scientific work is underway to find the causes of MCS. Recent work published in mainstream scientific journals indicates that MCS is a disease related to the olfactory (sense of smell) nerves in the nose. This nerve system provides a pathway for chemicals to pass directly into the brain. Chemicals traversing this path may affect the limbic system in the brain, which in turn influences both the endocrine and immune systems

and also influences a person's moods.[10] Other recent scientific work implicates another mechanism in causing MCS --inflammation of body tissues caused not by the immune system (which often causes inflammation to fight disease), but by a mechanism called "neurogenic inflammation." [4] A great deal of controlled scientific experimentation is going on now to test these hypotheses.

In the end, good science will prevail. But in the meantime, millions of peoples' lives have been ruined by MCS. Worse, the Johns Hopkins/NIOSH conference has been designed by cigarette scientists to prolong the misery.

--Peter Montague

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[1] Larry C. White, *MERCHANTS OF DEATH; THE AMERICAN TOBACCO INDUSTRY* (New York: William Morrow, 1988), pg. 32-34.

[2] Larry C. White, cited above in note 1, pg. 18, reporting an interview with William Kloepfer, vice president of the Tobacco Institute.

[3] Bette Hileman, "Multiple Chemical Sensitivity," *C&EN* [Chemical & Engineering News] Vol. 69 No. 29 (July 22, 1991), pg. 34. Hileman says, "The lack of a clear definition or diagnostic test for MCS [multiple chemical sensitivity] makes it very difficult to estimate its prevalence. However there is much indirect evidence that the number of people diagnosed with MCS is increasing."

[4] William J. Meggs, "Neurogenic Inflammation and Sensitivity to Environmental Chemicals," *ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH PERSPECTIVES* Vol. 101, Number 3 (August, 1993), pgs. 234-238.

[5] Responsible Industry for a Sound Environment [RISE], "Position Statement, Registries and 'Multiple Chemical Sensitivity' ('MCS')." (Washington, D.C.: RISE [1156 15th St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005; phone: (202) 872-3860], Dec. 14, 1994), pg. 1.

[6] "New Multiple Chemical Sensitivities Research Group Formed," RISK POLICY REPORT June 16, 1995, pg. 18.

[7] Dr. Gots quoted in "New Multiple Chemical Sensitivities Research Group Formed," RISK POLICY REPORT June 16, 1995, pg. 18.

[8] Affidavit of Ronald E. Gots in MARY JANE NETHERY V. THE SERVICEMASTER COMPANY ET AL, Circuit Court of Lee County, Mississippi, Cause #92-167(G)(L), Exhibit G, pg. 6, dated September 15, 1996.

[9] John E. Vena, "Book Reviews," JOURNAL OF OCCUPATIONAL MEDICINE Vol. 36 (July, 1994), pg. 678.

[10] Iris R. Bell, "An Olfactory-Limbic Model of Multiple Chemical Sensitivity Syndrome: Possible Relationships to Kindling and Affective Spectrum Disorders," BIOLOGICAL PSYCHIATRY Vol. 32 (1992), pgs. 218-242. And see: Iris R. Bell and others, "Self-Reported Illness from Chemical Odors in Young Adults without Clinical Syndromes or Occupational Exposures," ARCHIVES OF ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH Vol. 48 (January/February, 1993), pgs. 6-13.

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--Peter Montague, Editor

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