

Rachel's Environment & Health News

#486 - Our Stolen Future -- Part 1

March 20, 1996

The NEW YORK TIMES this week declared war on the theory and evidence that synthetic chemicals, such as dioxin, interfere with hormones, causing harm in wildlife and humans--a story we have been following since 1991.[1] Under a banner headline in Tuesday's Science Times section,[2] TIMES writer Gina Kolata reviewed the new book by Theo Colborn, Dianne Dumanoski, and John Peterson ("Pete") Myers, OUR STOLEN FUTURE. OUR STOLEN FUTURE is based on a review of literally thousands of scientific studies going back 60 years.[3] The main idea in the book is that synthetic (human-created) chemicals may be interfering with the hormones that control and regulate growth, health and behavior in wildlife and humans, leading to birth defects, problems of sexual development, breast cancer, prostate cancer, and even mental problems like attention deficit disorder, reduced IQ, and violent behavior. Both Colborn and Myers hold Ph.D. degrees in zoology and are fully-qualified scientists, yet Ms. Kolata's review begins this way:

"In a warning supported by allies who include Robert Redford and Vice President Al Gore, some environmentalists are asserting that humans and wildlife are facing a new and serious threat from synthetic chemicals."

Thus in her opening paragraph, Ms. Kolata managed to trivialize the issue and discredit the authors by giving the impression that (a) "some environmentalists" are the source of the data; (b) perhaps some other environmentalists don't buy it; (c) the book's main supporters are politicians and movie actors; (d) scientists aren't in the picture.

Not until the fourth paragraph do we learn that Theo Colborn is herself a scientist, but by that time we've already been told that the message of OUR STOLEN FUTURE is "controversial," and that "the factual basis of the book's alarms... have been refuted by careful studies," and that co-author Pete Myers heads "an environmental group" (which is Ms. Kolata's description of the W. Alton Jones Foundation in Charlottesville, Va.). Ms. Kolata never does get around to telling her readers that Dr. Myers is a fully-credentialed scientist. Nor does she describe or name a single "careful study" that refutes any of the premises of OUR STOLEN FUTURE.

Ms. Kolata's review plunges downhill from there. It is not until the sixth paragraph that we learn, "besides Mr. Gore's support, OUR STOLEN FUTURE has been endorsed by several biologists and toxicologists, who say the book deserves to be heeded." Even then Ms. Kolata never names or quotes a single biologist or toxicologist who supports OUR STOLEN FUTURE. Instead, she devotes long paragraphs to four scientists who, she says, are critical of the theory that synthetic chemicals can disrupt hormones and thus cause harm to wildlife and humans.

However, even in quoting these contrarian scientists, Ms. Kolata deceives and misleads her readers by selectively distorting their views.

For example, she quotes Dr. Michael Gallo of Rutgers University saying that OUR STOLEN FUTURE is "hypothesis masked as fact." Yet on May 15, 1990, the NEW YORK TIMES itself quoted Dr. Gallo to quite different effect.[4] Here is the context: The writer of that 1990 story (TIMES staffer Jon R. Luoma) said, "Research now appears to have established that [dioxins] can affect animals and humans by mimicking steroid hormones, which are themselves extremely potent chemicals."

Luoma concluded, in that 1990 TIMES story, that the symptoms of dioxin exposure "range from suppression of the immune system to striking disruptions in cell growth and differentiation, particularly in fetal development." This is precisely the message of OUR STOLEN FUTURE.

Then Luoma quoted Dr. Michael Gallo, Rutgers University, saying

TCDD [dioxin] "is as potent as any hormone" and "it doesn't take much hormone, or dioxin, to have a tremendous effect." And Dr. Gallo said, "From a toxicological point of view, nothing we've learned has caused us to back away from the idea that these [dioxins] are very, very potent chemicals." Does Gina Kolata not read the NEW YORK TIMES?

In her zeal to undermine the credibility of OUR STOLEN FUTURE, Ms. Kolata then quotes Dr. Stephen Safe, of Texas A&M University pooh-poohing Colborn and Myers's evidence that synthetic chemicals interfere with hormones in humans.

But back in May, 1990, the TIMES quoted Stephen Safe to quite different effect. Here is the context:

Jon Luoma's May 15, 1990, TIMES story pointed out that animal studies have shown that dioxin has a "breathtaking toxicity" and in laboratory animals dioxin causes a broad spectrum of toxic responses. "With laboratory animals, it seemed as if dioxin caused just about any effect you can think of," Steven Safe, a professor of toxicology at Texas A&M University, said. "You name it and [dioxin] did it, and at extraordinarily low doses," he said. "New research has not reversed these findings, it has merely helped explain them," Dr. Safe said. Luoma then went on to point out that, "...[S]tudies of humans exposed accidentally to TCDD [dioxin] have shown unusually high levels of enzymes that are typically induced by steroid hormones, a strong clue that a hormone-like response is triggered in humans exposed to dioxin as well." This is precisely what OUR STOLEN FUTURE is about, except that now dioxin is not the only known culprit: 50 additional synthetic chemicals have been shown to have the power to disrupt hormones. Does Gina Kolata not read the NEW YORK TIMES?

In her zeal to discredit OUR STOLEN FUTURE, Ms. Kolata sets up Theo Colborn, then knocks her down by quoting another scientist who apparently dismisses Colborn's argument that synthetic chemicals mimic hormones and affect the brain. Watch how this plays out to discredit Colborn:

Ms. Kolata writes: "Asked for the strongest, most convincing evidence that endocrine disruptors are affecting humans, Dr. Colborn said it was studies indicating that these chemicals are causing hyperactivity in children. 'The evidence is just building up,' she said, citing animal studies.

"She added that she also worried that endocrine-disrupting chemicals were causing a decline in intelligence and said that animal studies showed that such chemicals could weaken short-term memory in rodents.

"If you have problems with short-term memory, you have problems with intelligence,' she said. 'Remember, the thyroid fits in here,' she said. 'There are thyroid problems in practically every fish in the Great Lakes. And thyroidologists say that it takes just the slightest shift during critical times in the development of the brain and you will have behavioral problems and intelligence problems.'

"But Dr. Maria I. New, chief of pediatric endocrinology at New York Hospital-Cornell University Medical Center in New York, said there was no evidence that learning disabilities, violence or a drop in I.Q. had anything to do with prenatal exposure to estrogens or endocrine-disrupting chemicals."

NO EVIDENCE, says Dr. Maria I. New. Sounds like an open and shut case, doesn't it? Colborn must be wrong: there must be no evidence that these hormones can affect the brain.

But wait. Back on May 3, 1994, TIMES writer Natalie Angier quoted the same Dr. Maria I. New saying that she was conducting research to determine whether the amount of androgen (male sex hormone) in a female fetus affected a woman's neurological [nervous system] development. "There are definitely effects of

androgens on the brain," Dr. New said. [5] Does Gina Kolata not read the NEW YORK TIMES?

In her zeal to discredit OUR STOLEN FUTURE, Ms. Kolata goes to absurd extremes. She paraphrases Pete Myers saying "the evidence was sufficient to press for at least a worldwide ban on DDT and further restrictions on PCBs" --DDT and PCBs being two of the best-documented and most harmful hormone-disrupting chemicals. But Ms. Kolata won't let Dr. Myers hold even this modest position. She insists that "[S]everal leading scientists view such position as premature at best." Premature to advocate a global ban on DDT? The U.S. banned DDT 25 years ago, in 1971. Premature to restrict PCBs? The U.S. severely restricted the use of PCBs 20 years ago, in 1976. Ms. Kolata writes that these "leading scientists" say that the case for ridding the world of DDT and PCBs "seems fueled more by hyperbole than facts and that many of the claims of demonstrable harm, when examined, turn out to be a house of cards."

Does Ms. Kolata not read the NEW YORK TIMES? Does she not even read stories she herself has published previously in the TIMES? On August 2, 1988, Ms. Kolata reported in the TIMES that an industrial accident in Taiwan in 1979 exposed a group of people to PCBs and those exposures "have caused an epidemic of birth defects." [6] Is it not simple common sense to advocate restrictions on a chemical that can cause an epidemic of birth defects in humans?

Gina Kolata's review of OUR STOLEN FUTURE is unfair, biased, deceptive, and distorted, clearly aimed at discrediting all of the book's ideas, even its most unremarkable, mainstream ideas. It reminds me of the crude hatchet jobs done on Rachel Carson's SILENT SPRING back in 1962. Ms. Kolata's review raises the obvious question, who in the chemical industry "got to" Ms. Kolata and how did they do it?

But the more important question is, why did the editors at the TIMES assign such a lightweight to review such an important book? OUR STOLEN FUTURE is a major work with a profoundly important message. Anyone who reads the NEW YORK TIMES knows that the issues raised in this book have been described and discussed at serious scientific meetings, and in the columns of the TIMES itself, for some years now. [7] To allow a bigoted reviewer to suggest that these ideas have no basis in fact and have little or no support in the scientific community is a desecration of the journalistic values that the TIMES is committed to upholding. Mr. Kolata's review is unfair, false, distorted, biased, and misleading. Everyone --I mean EVERYONE --should read this book, and everyone should give a copy to their family doctor. OUR STOLEN FUTURE is well written and easily understood. It deserves a fair reading --which Gina Kolata did not have the intellectual or moral capacity to give it. The TIMES can do better. Much better.

--Peter Montague

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[1] See REHW #263, #264, #322, #323, #343, #364, #365, #372, #377, #432, #438, #446, #447, #448.

[2] Gina Kolata, "Chemicals That Mimic Hormones Stir Alarm and Debate," NEW YORK TIMES March 19, 1995, pg. C1. And: Gina Kolata, "Sperm Counts: Some Experts See a Fall, Others See Poor Data," NEW YORK TIMES March 19, 1995, pg. C1.

[3] Theo Colborn, Dianne Dumanoski, and John Peterson Myers, OUR STOLEN FUTURE (N.Y.: Dutton, 1996).

[4] Jon R. Luoma, "Scientists Are Unlocking Secrets of Dioxin's Devastating Power," NEW YORK TIMES May 15, 1990, pg. C4.

[5] Natalie Angier, "Male Hormone Molds Women, Too, In Mind and Body," NEW YORK TIMES May 3, 1994, pgs. C1, C13.

[6] Gina Kolata, "PCB Exposure Linked to Birth Defects in Taiwan," NEW YORK TIMES August 2, 1988, page unknown.

[7] See, for example, items cited in footnotes 1 through 6; and see Jon R. Luoma, "New Effect of Pollutants: Hormone Mayhem," NEW YORK TIMES March 24, 1992, pg. C1.

Descriptor terms: endocrine disrupters; dioxin; hormones; endocrine system; new york times; gina kolata; theo colborn; dianne dumanoski; john peterson myers; book reviews; journalism; journalistic ethics;