

Death of British journalist after eating organic peanuts highlights absurdity of GMO safety scare

One of the central contentions of anti-GMO activists is that foods that contain ingredients made from genetically engineered ingredients are harmful or pose unacceptable risks. There is no evidence of harm, however. No health problem, not even a fever, has been linked to the consumption of GMOs. And every major independent international oversight organization, including those in Africa, has publicly concluded after reviewing more than one thousand independent studies that [foods made with GM ingredients are as safe or safer](#)—they are extensively tested for allergenicity and other issues—than other conventional foods, including organic foods.

The track record of the safety of organic foods is problematic, however. Tens of thousands of people get sick every year from consuming bacteria-laced organic products, a result of the production method which relies on the use of manure. Deaths from contamination are not uncommon.

This problem has reemerged in Uganda. Rebecca Vassie, a British photojournalist who had worked for three years in the country [died](#) after suffering a severe allergic reaction to the eating of organic groundnuts—African peanuts. Various forms of organic groundnut is eaten widely across Uganda. It's a sad turn of events but not without some tragic irony. Her death comes just as anti-GMO campaigners are aggressively trying to make the case that approved GMOs pose unusual toxic and allergenic threats. Currently only GM foods go through rigorous testing to prevent exactly the kind of lethal issue that killed Vassie.

Are consumers being hoodwinked by anti biotech activist?

This untimely death also raises the question: What would happen if scientists could genetically modify a groundnut to reduce or eliminate its allergenic properties? Scientists are addressing that very issue in regards to peanuts and other nuts known to cause allergies in high numbers. Is it possible to make food safe for most individuals? Almost all foods present allergic threats to some small subsection of the population. Yet, issues of food allergenicity have been swept under the propaganda carpet to make it appear that conventional and organic foods are all safe. This terrible death underscores the naivete represented in that perception.

Consumers assume that conventional food is safe, that organic foods are even safer and that GM foods are not safe—despite the fact that only GM foods are vigorously tested. It is staggering to comprehend the zeal exercised by precautionary proponents in demanding that GM foods and only GM foods should be tested while ignoring the corollary need for testing or labeling of conventional and organic foods with known issues of allergenicity or toxicity. The legal and consumer issue should be whether a food is safe or not safe rather than whether it is or is not GM. By focusing so much on GMOs, advocacy groups manipulate consumers to think that everything non GM is safe and anything with GMs is not.

No single food is safe for every individual. The only way one can know food is not safe to them beyond known facts is actually by consuming it. Our forefathers went through such experiences to select foods

that we now enjoy and call conventional. Some died in the process of selecting what was safe from the general pool of potential food options. The intended safety bar raised for GM foods should be thought through and made realistic—and should conform with how conventional foods are evaluated, no more no less. We need a common goal of making food safe for all consumers, regardless of whether it is GM or not, organic or not.

When you visit most homes, you will find some members of the same household that do not eat a particular food. These are mostly protein rich foods like meat, fish, eggs, milk. The reactions of such individual to such foods are normally discovered when they are still young. The challenge comes when eating processed foods, which may have unknown food ingredients that one is allergic to. For example, cassava has a high cyanide content, yet it is not banned, while GM crops with little or no allergenic or toxic impact are restricted. Should Uganda ban groundnuts because of one incident? The answer is coexistence—making sure that everyone is informed about which foods, including nuts, might cause allergies, regardless of the growing method, conventional vs. organic.

Critical lessons

- Very few food problems are related to GMOs
- Shifting the focus from the overall safety and narrowing it down to GMO is irresponsible
- Not every conventional crop is safe for food and not all GMOs require spraying
- Singling out GMOs will result in consumers paying less attention to other food issues
- Tight testing procedures that GMOs are subjected to make them safer than conventional and organic products
- Food that is safe to one person may not be safe to another

Rest in peace Vassie!

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