

Anti-GMO activists use FOIA to bully mother-scientist nutrition and lactation expert

The best way to get away with bullying is to blame the victim after punching her in the gut: “Principal, she did it first.”

Anti-GMO groups’ tactics are just a big-kid version of these playground antics. Led by organic industry-funded [U.S. Right to Know \(USRTK\)](#), these groups are now wielding Freedom of Information Act requests like hammers, demanding that public scientists turn over tens of thousands of innocent emails linked to their research efforts.

One of the latest targets of USRTK’s playground escapades is Washington State University nutritionist and mother of three Michelle (Shelley) McGuire, an expert on human milk and lactation. In July, Dr. McGuire publicly presented preliminary research findings that challenged a widely-touted anti-GMO activist assertion that the herbicide glyphosate, which they denounce as dangerously toxic, is present in mother’s milk, presumably posing harm to infants and children.

The US Environmental Protection Agency, the European Commission and a joint panel of World Health Organization and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (WHO/FAO risk analysis [concluded](#) glyphosate is “unlikely to present a public health concern” and is unlikely to be genotoxic”; a sub group of WHO, known as IARC, recently classified glyphosate in the same category as sunlight and coffee, concluding it does pose some risk if exposures are prolonged, which is not the case for the miniscule exposure in food residues), among dozens of global science oversight groups, have determined that glyphosate is mildly toxic to humans, not carcinogenic and perfectly safe as used by home gardeners and farmers alike.

(Here is a [statement by WHO](#) as to the difference between “hazard” analysis versus “risk” assessment, which is what [regulators use](#) to determine whether humans may be harmed. See [article by GLP](#): Why regulators conclude glyphosate safe while IARC, alone, claims it could cause cancer?]

McGuire detailed her findings at the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology (FASEB) Science Research Conference in Big Sky, Montana, in conjunction with a university-distributed press release. She found that glyphosate does not show up in mother’s milk, or is below the detection limit of a very sensitive, newly-developed assay. In addition, as McGuire explained to Genetic Literacy Project, although glyphosate and its metabolite AMPA were present in the urine of some of the mothers, their concentrations were extremely low, at harmless levels. Both the analytical methods and clinical study are being prepared for submission to peer-reviewed journals as soon as next week.

Protecting mothers’ milk

McGuire first became interested in the controversy over glyphosate in breast milk after the anti-GMO group Moms Across America published a [“pilot study”](#) in conjunction with the European anti-biotech website Sustainable Pulse, which is run by organic entrepreneur [Henry Rowlands](#). The “study”, which claimed that Roundup is “now in mothers’ breast milk”, was based on ten self-collected breastmilk

samples analyzed by a small lab—one that does not do university quality evaluations. MAA—that well recognized independent science research organization — concluded and published their “finding” that three mothers had high, “detectable levels of glyphosate in their breast milk.”

Academics Review, a website run by independent geneticists, [analyzed](#) the findings:

[H]igh in this case means measurable above the lower limit of detection rather than high meaning a cause for alarm. The highest of these 3 samples, if real, contained glyphosate at levels that represent a worst-case infant exposure (33 µg/kg/day) more than 50-fold below the ADI (Acceptable Daily Intake) set by U.S. EPA regulatory toxicologists (1750 µg/kg). The ADI is set to provide a wide margin of safety of exposure.

In other words, even if the 10 Moms Across America/Sustainable Pulse samples had been properly collected via a well-controlled methodology, the three samples that showed glyphosate contained a minute fraction of the amount considered safe on a daily basis. The claims by Sustainable Pulse and Moms Across America is little more than junk science.

As a human lactation researcher, McGuire also took interest in the publicized claims—and had the research skills to actually evaluate the issue in a laboratory setting. She reached out to MAA founder Zen Honeycutt last May, inquiring about how the samples were collected (i.e. whether the milk was expressed manually or via an electric pump); the demographics of the study subjects (age and time postpartum); and the analytical methods of the study. She received a disappointing reply: “As this was not a scientific study we did not collect all the data you are hoping for. The testing was the best available method.” Honeycutt also told McGuire that MAA had secured funding for a much larger study, but she would not reveal the source of the money or when this promised research might be published.

McGuire decided to launch her own research. The results directly contradicted what Honeycutt claims to have found. “The Moms Across America study flat out got it wrong,” read the original Washington State University press release. It didn’t take long for the anti-GMO activists to pounce. Just four days after the press release about McGuire’s findings hit the web, USRTK filed a FOIA request with McGuire’s dean, demanding years of the scientist’s emails and associated documents.

When used well, FOIA is a tool that helps maintain an open and transparent government. But there is a line that, when crossed, transforms a law encouraging checks and balances into a weapon to intimidate and hinder valuable research and researchers. In the case of McGuire, USRTK crossed that line. Rather than working on securing grants to research whether breastfeeding might transmit leprosy, she now finds herself wasting dozens of hours plowing through old emails. No doubt hampering important scientific work is an intended malicious goal of these FOIA requests.

McGuire is concerned about the abuse of public records laws, which were written to ensure transparency from federal and state employees. “This will cripple health research nationwide,” she said, concerned that responding to hostile FOIA requests might become the new norm. They were never intended to target universities and researchers. But now, any time a public scientist’s research threatens to conflict with an interest group’s agenda, FOIAs could be exploited to silence that research. “We feel violated”,

McGuire said of herself and her WSU colleagues, whose emails are also subject to the FOIA request.

With the threat of public records laws looming over their heads, scientists may choose to avoid contentious research questions altogether. McGuire said she believes universities need to stand up to frivolous FOIA demands from organizations with clear agendas. She cited a push back statement issued in 2012 by a University of California Los Angeles task force on academic freedom.

Public records requests are neither a substitute for nor an effective check on peer review by the scholarly community, but instead damage the process by threatening scholars into silence when they should be speaking truthfully and frankly about their concerns. The published record is the gold standard on which scholarship rests and it is readily available to the public. Public records requests of private, draft, or pre-publication materials only serve to confound the peer review process, rather than leading to an improvement or check on this process.

Activists play ‘bad mom’ card

Years ago, McGuire negotiated the first part-time tenure-track research position at WSU so she could devote more time and energy to raising her three children. But just hours after McGuire’s findings were publicized, MAA leader Zen Honeycutt viciously began questioning her fitness as a mom. In an email thread, Honeycutt wrote: “Much of what you state about flaws in our report is untrue and as a mother I would think you would be ashamed by what you put out.” She continued:

Moms Across America got nothing wrong. The results are what they are. In fact we clearly state in the report that while mother’s breast milk is the number one choice, we just suggest eating organic. Apparently eating organic, and not GMOs, is what you really have the problem with. I do not know how you sleep. Shame on you for contributing to more confusion, lies and protecting the profits of corporations rather than people and babies.

Ouch. Honeycutt certainly knows how to hit moms where it hurts; right in the you-don’t-protect-babies gut. Can we say that Honeycutt has achieved the height of mom-versus-mom bullying, personally vilifying a scientist mother of three whose only “agenda” is studying human lactation to help mom’s around the world?

Sustainable Pulse director Henry Rowlands echoed the “mom shaming” and “questionable ethics” bullying tactics in a July email to McGuire. “Regarding your care for your children, I question this considering you choose to work with a company that has poisoned children across the World on a regular basis. ... [O]r maybe you don’t believe Agent Orange, DDT and PCBs are harmful to children’s health and found in Breast Milk? I suppose it comes down to morals versus work?”

Preposterous and offensive. McGuire has spent her entire career and 24+ years of motherhood supporting moms and babies—her own and those around the world. She is a long-time member and national spokesperson for the [American Society for Nutrition](#) and an executive committee member of the [International Society for Research in Human Milk and Lactation](#),

“To have these folks question my care and love for children, especially my own, is stunning,” she told me. “They know nothing about me nor what kind of life I live.” In her experience, she said, this sort of mud-slinging comes from a place of anger. “My life is built around love and care for others, so this is especially hurtful. I would welcome both Zen Honeycutt and Henry Rowlands to walk in my shoes for a few days, so that they might understand better how world-class research is designed, funded, carried out, and published. They would also quickly see that I am dedicated to improving the health of mothers and infants.”

Industry connections?

Along with the mom shaming tactics, McGuire’s critics played the predictable shill card. “Considering your ties to Monsanto,” Honeycutt wrote in a blog post, “I am not surprised [that you criticized the MAA study].”

Another cheap shot. The WSU breastmilk study was independently funded and samples were collected in conjunction with a National Science Foundation project designed to document microbes and sugars in milk samples collected around the world. As the university’s press release noted, the sample analysis was initially performed at a Monsanto laboratory. The results were verified at Wisconsin-based Covance laboratory, which is not affiliated with Monsanto or the WSU researchers.

McGuire disclosed to the Genetic Literacy Project that she has received a small unrestricted grant of \$10,000 from Monsanto on an entirely unrelated research project related to breast feeding and leprosy. Industry grants are the norm in university research, and \$10,000, while helpful, is a pittance. McGuire’s research interest in human lactation existed far before she received any industry funding and certainly did not shape the study’s outcomes. And though federal funding is important for university researchers, it falls far short of overall research needs. Private funding makes up slightly more than half of all food and agricultural research dollars.

Image not found or type unknown

Public-private partnerships, which are ubiquitous and well-documented, help researchers address questions that the public and private sectors need answers to. For instance, McGuire's interest in dietary factors that impact human milk composition has led to research grants from both the dairy and beef industry. McGuire explained that these studies, some of which support health benefits of dairy and beef and some of which do not, are all published in peer-reviewed journals so that other scientists and the public can understand what methods were used in the studies and, importantly, benefit from the findings.

Reflecting this spirit of openness and collaboration, McGuire has urged both Honeycutt and Rowlands to publish their promised mother's milk research in peer-reviewed journals. Don't hold your breath. As McGuire advises her introductory nutrition students at WSU, "Anyone can put whatever drivel they want on the internet. Unless a study's been published in a reputable peer-reviewed journal, you can really just ignore it."

GMO critics more interested in circus attacks than independent research

McGuire says she was naïve in not anticipating the harsh backlash after she challenged a key anti-GMO propaganda document. Yet even after the public attacks, she had hoped she could dialogue with GMO critics. Upon receiving notice of the FOIA request, she called USRTK director Gary Ruskin. She told him that she was happy to share any information or documentation he wanted. Instead of taking McGuire up on her offer, Ruskin patronizingly compared the FOIA demand to a midterm exam.

"We're testing you to see how good you've been," he scolded the scientist, who earned her PhD in Human

Nutrition with a focus on breastfeeding science from Cornell University more than twenty years ago. Ruskin, who draws his salary from USRTK, which in turn is mostly [funded by](#) the anti-GMO Organic Consumers Association, then hung up on McGuire.

Ruskin [wrote](#) of his tactics on the USRTK website, “This is about the extent to which corporations such as Monsanto and their front groups are using our public universities and the scientists and academics who work there as tools to promote their agendas and their profits.”

“It’s clear to me now that I underestimated how vitriolic this whole anti-GMO propaganda world had become”, McGuire said. She didn’t anticipate how her emails might be twisted out of context. “But my naïve outlook on this whole crazy world is now gone. I now see this FOIA-driven academic terrorism for what it is: an absolutely disruptive and chilling threat to public university scientists working in agriculture, food, and nutrition.”

McGuire’s funding and collaboration with Monsanto scientists did not shape the results of her study. The source of funding never has, and never will influence her results, she says. The playground bullying of academic researchers needs to stop. And as always, the best way to stop bullies is to stand up to them.

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