

# village view

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How rational an animal is the species homo sapiens?

Now that a government study, drafted by the General Accounting Office, has warned Americans that at least fourteen percent of the dressed meat and poultry sold to us during 1974, 1975 and 1976 contained illegal residues of animal drugs, pesticides or environmental contaminants, what do we do to prevent being poisoned by the food we eat?

Although the report states the residues don't pose immediate threats to health, few of us like the idea that practically every bite we take may contribute to our chances of developing cancer, producing defective offspring, or increasing the amount of toxic substances within our own bodies.

The government study's assurances that public health isn't immediately threatened are somewhat weakened by its stated opinion that "repeated exposure to low levels of certain residues may pose a hazard to human health."

Since that study covered a period of three years, it's realistic to assume that in the intervening five years between the study's initiation and the present, most of us have experienced the repeated exposure we're now made aware may be detrimental to our health.

And because the majority of us have been eating regularly for a good many years, chances are excellent that repeated exposure occurred before the study was begun. It continues to occur, of course, with every mouthful of dressed meat and poultry we consume.

According to the study there are no laws currently on the books to prevent marketing contaminated meat and poultry. Because it takes the Department of Agriculture between one to four weeks to complete various tests to determine whether a given animal destined for the dinner plates of the unsuspecting average American is, indeed, contaminated, by the time the test results are known, the chicken or turkey, the steer beef, pork or lamb has been marketed, cooked, carved into meal-sized portions and joyfully consumed along with all those vitamin-packed fruits and vegetables comprising a dinner menu.

And, although there are new methods available for testing meat samples within 24 hours, the Department of Agriculture has not yet adopted those methods. One wonders what they're waiting for.

All 143 different drugs and pesticides that animal producers mix with animal feed to control diseases and speed growth and use where animals are housed and pastured to control rodents, insects and weeds, are apt to leave residues in raw meat and poultry.

The drugs include penicillin, neomycin, tetracycline and sulfa. It is estimated eighty percent of all meat and poultry marketed are either fed or exposed to at least some of these additives and substance.

If pesticides control rodents and insects, and herbicides kill weeds in grazing fields, it stands to reason they can't do much to enhance the quality of human health, particularly when ingested on a regular basis. If drugs control diseases (until the disease organisms develop immunity), what effect do these drugs have on humans? Apparently no one is sure. Nor is anyone certain what types of mutations diseases will develop, or what our resistance may be to those mutations.

Although the study isn't specific about its findings, it does indicate that residues of drugs and pesticides have been found in human tissues and fluids, including mother's milk.

Forty-two of the drugs and pesticides found in raw meat and poultry samples are believed to be cancer-causing agents; twenty are suspected birth-defect inducers; six may result in mutations, according to the General Accounting Office draft.

In light of the findings, the report recommends legislation to authorize the Department of Agriculture to delay butchering and marketing of meats and poultry until tests for residues can be made, and to release for public consumption only those animals bearing test identification tags indicating freedom from residues.

Also recommended is a law prohibiting misuse of animal drugs and setting penalties for violations of residue levels in marketed meat and poultry. The suggestion is made that the Environmental Protection Agency, the Food and Drug Administration, and the Department of Agriculture beef up their programs in this area.

Meanwhile, what does the consumer do to protect himself? Raise his own animals for meat? Become vegetarian? Restrict his protein intake to fish?

While these alternatives may at first seem appealing, the impracticality of raising livestock on the average American family's limited acreage is immediately apparent. Declining to eat meat and poultry is, for most people, deprivation; maintaining a diet with adequate protein for building body muscle is complex and requires a broader knowledge of food properties than most meal-preparers possess. And because our fresh waters and the seas of the world have been, and continue to be, contaminated by injudicious fertilization, dumping, oil spills, mercury and other poisonous discharges, fishes are equally as likely as meat and poultry to carry hazardous residues in their flesh.

One wonders, at times, how life on earth survives! Again, one ponders the earth's present and growing problem of over-population, and wonders if perhaps social scientist Malthus was wrong. It was he who predicted the human population would be controlled by epidemic, war or starvation. In his day, lethal drug and pesticide additives hadn't been introduced to the world's environment.

Weeds, insects, and rodents were viewed as much a part of the natural condition as cows, chickens, pigs, sheep and man, himself. The notion of eradicating pests or controlling animal disease or growth with drugs hadn't been conceived. Only in recent decades have chemical fertilizers replaced manures, DDT, the fly-swatter, or drugs, nature's bountiful pastures. While our diets, according to our government's study, now contain dozens of poisonous substances that, if we continue to consume them, pose a threat to human health (and quite possibly to the health of animals upon which we depend for food) human life expectancy continues to increase.

According to the United States Public Health Service, the average life expectancy in this country increased from 47.3 years in 1900 to more than 70 years, by 1972, and now exceeds 75 years.

On one hand, then, we live in a world where we attempt to lengthen life-expectancy even though we recognize the danger of over-population; on the other, we permit ourselves to be fed, every day of our lives, foods carrying residues that it is recognized may induce serious suffering. Add to this the fact that the medical profession does everything within its power to assure our declining years will be extended as long as possible.

In just one year, bear in mind, cancer deaths in the United States increased from 332,730 in 1971 to 346,930 in 1972, or almost six percent. Statistics, year by year since, continue to show increases.

In spite of all this, man smugly continues to refer to himself as the only rational animal on the face of the globe.