

EDITORIAL

Is the final choice at hand?

First it was DDT. Scientists discovered DDT building up in mothers' milk. DDT also weakened eggshells. The osprey became nearly extinct. Hens' eggs were so fragile, producers had difficulty getting eggs to market in one piece. Since DDT was banned, ospreys are making a comeback and hens' eggs are sturdier.

The price we pay for discontinuing use of DDT is that Dutch elm beetles are making a comeback, too; Dutch elm disease takes its toll among the remaining wine-glass elms that line the main streets of several Cape Cod villages. Tent caterpillars are seen once again in the crotches of fruit trees in the spring. Gypsy moth caterpillars ravage our woodlands season after season.

Then it was Love Canal, the town built on a toxic waste dump and abandoned because poisons affected inhabitants' health, causing birth defects and other problems. Next we learned that dioxin, the herbicide we sprayed over countless square miles of Southeast Asia during the Viet Nam conflict, and the same chemical we used indiscriminately to control blowing dust in this country, had contaminated dozens of communities. Entire populations had to re-locate.

Now it is EDB, a pesticide used to rid citrus storage plants of destructive fruit flies, to protect grain and flour mill machinery and storage areas from a variety of noxious pests, bugs that eat food intended for people. Nobody wants to find bugs in his breakfast cereal . . . but nobody wants cancer either. Laboratory animals fed food treated with EDB develop cancer. Reason suggests humans who eat foods treated with EDB will, too.

Scientists warn that traces of cancer-causing chemicals are now present in groundwater, rain, fish, poultry, meat, and grain . . . and also in the blood and fat tissues of nearly every man, woman, and child in this country. They say that the higher the concentrations, the more likely it becomes that cases of cancer will occur.

On the other hand, alternatives are equally unacceptable.

Farming has undergone a revolution in the 20th century; in 1910 the average farmer fed and clothed seven people. Chemicals that destroy 10,000 species of insects, control 1,500 types of fungal diseases, kill 1,800 kinds of weeds, and wipe out 1,500 sorts of parasites make it possible for one American farmer to produce enough food and clothing for 78 people today.

As world populations swell, American farmers work to fill food demand. Response to the perception that population growth is a serious threat, that millions may starve unless populations are controlled, is found only in China. The Chinese are meeting the problem head-on by persuading couples to produce no more than one child. In America perhaps we are subconsciously solving the problem through chemical treatment of food and water supplies. But it's a toss-up whether people prefer to die of starvation or cancer.

Statistics reveal that nearly three times as many Americans develop cancer today as did so fifty years ago. Some explain that is because our life-span has increased; others doubt that more people living longer can possibly account for the jump from one-in-eight to one-in-three.

Not everyone, of course, is doomed to die of cancer or starvation. Some cancers are curable. Many of us will die of other causes first. Why not ban the use of chemicals and employ non-poisonous methods to destroy vermin? The trouble, of course, is that other procedures are expensive. One method, irradiation, increases food prices by amounts varying from 300 to 600 percent. If your weekly food budget is now \$40, could you find \$120 to \$240 to feed your family? Furthermore, no one knows yet whether irradiated food is safe for human consumption.

What it all may eventually boil down to is making a choice: drinking liquids and eating foods that contain small quantities of dangerous chemicals . . . or dying of thirst and starvation. A great many Americans will have difficulty making that choice.