

# Genetically Modified Food

JOHN HYDE

Spreading fear of the future can be good for anti-business.

**F**EAR of genetically modified (GM) food has become so widespread in the UK that Sainsbury's chain of stores has undertaken not to stock it. I predict that in a few years the promise will be quietly forgotten. Nevertheless, for the present, the store's marketing department will know what it is doing. In spite of European Union restrictions that seem draconian to North American producers, the Blair Government is under pressure to do more to protect the same people who shrugged off Hitler's buzz bombs from tomato paste that the other side of the Atlantic Alliance is happily eating. Although Australia has pure food laws that are generally effective and trusted, we come late to the task of specifically regulating genetic modification as such. This, however, we are about to embark upon.

Because plants must protect themselves against their predators, much of what we eat, if ingested in sufficient quantity, would kill us. We therefore live with poisons and it is only prudent to be cautious about what we eat. Anxiety is a survival mechanism. People who start at every hare, squandering nervous energy and attention upon low-probability risks become, however, victims of their own neuroses. Perhaps some folk actually enjoy states of heightened anxiety, but their misplaced fears must engage resources that would otherwise be devoted to reducing the hazards that appreciably shorten lifespan or, and this may be worse, make long lives less worth living.

But anxiety is visceral and most people have extraordinary difficulty distinguishing likelihoods of one-in-a-thousand from likelihoods of one-in-ten-million. They worry about mad cow disease while driving their cars (badly). They suffer wildly disproportionate fears of the unfamiliar. In short, they possess traits that afford a ready market for the hysteria and nostrums of the scare-mongering industry. So mankind peppers itself with dire predictions and always has. These fears mostly come to nought. At the turn of the first millennium, ranting experts with long faces told the credulous that the Antichrist was about to destroy their crops, their chil-

dren and their hopes of an afterlife. At the turn of the second, when mortal life is more pleasant and an afterlife seems less probable, similar long faces tell us that we are poisoning our life-support system and ourselves.

Even in poisons, fashions change. When I entered the Federal Parliament in 1974, Rex Connor told me that uranium extraction was a huge potential benefit awaiting development. Before I lost my seat in 1983, Barry Jones told me that biotechnology was the new hope. Now I am told that even it has entered the service of the Antichrist.

I don't believe it. Man has been manipulating life forms since husbandry and

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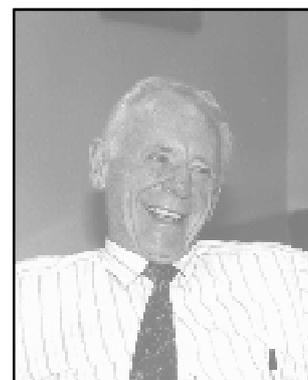
agriculture began. His methods were, however, slow and hit-or-miss. Plant and animal breeders combined large blocks of genes by mating individuals with differing desirable traits. Then the undesirable traits were eliminated by backcrossing and selection. More recently, plant breeders have irradiated seed to encourage mutation.

Following the discovery by James Watson and Francis Crick of the molecular structure of DNA in about 1960, biotechnologists have learned how to introduce genes to plants and animals with much greater precision and from species other than that of the host. This technology has become referred to as 'genetic engineering' and the term 'genetically modified' has come to refer to living or dead matter that carries genes introduced by 'gene splicing'. The likelihood of pro-

ducing a food with an unwanted, say, carcinogen is obviously less when such precise methods are employed. Nevertheless, it is this food that people have been encouraged to fear and which many say should be labelled as such.

Labelling is not, however, easily or cheaply done. Indeed it will probably be easier and more effective to label food that contains *no* genetically modified matter whatsoever. The advantages of reduced chemical usage and higher yields to be gained from genetically modified varieties are so large that, in 1999, about half the US soya bean crop and a quarter of the corn (maize) harvest will be of genetically modified varieties. If there is demand for non-GM foods, as there is for organically grown foods, then producers of it will identify their product. I hope they make squillions.

There are some environmental risks associated with the production of GM crops that are less improbable than those associated with eating them. Nevertheless, as GM crops already allow much reduced use of weedicides and insecticides, opponents of GM foods are on a collision course with genuine environmentalists. The risks of not producing GM foods are economic for Australians and nutritional for the Third World. More fundamentally, warnings about trivial risks merely devalue warnings that wise people would heed. Crying 'Wolf!' is not smart social behaviour.



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