

Tanya Dahms Letter to the Editor Leader Post, 13 April 2022

Opinion: No reasonable scenario to allow cosmetic pesticides in city

I would be hard pressed to imagine a scenario in which pesticides would be protecting our health or our safety, writes Tanya Dahms,

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Do you know that it rains pesticides for approximately two weeks in Saskatchewan? We can't control what the province is doing, but we can try to regulate what is happening in our own Regina neighbourhoods. The rampant use of pesticides in the city should be alarming given their link to human cancer, for which our children and pets are the most susceptible.

I would like to dispel some of the misinformation that is rampant about pesticides, often propagated by the pesticide industry which has a vested interest. They would like us to believe that pesticides are completely safe and this is patently false. Health Canada is behind on reviewing some pesticides for commercial use in Canada, so their approvals do not take into account the current literature on pesticides. Two of the most common pesticide ingredients (glyphosate and 2,4-D) are linked to many disease states in humans; for example, cancer. This is alarming given that one in two Canadians are projected to be diagnosed with cancer in their lifetime, with one in four fatalities. Since cancer is a "multi hit" disease, requiring many things to go wrong, it is well accepted that minimizing our exposure to environmental contaminants is paramount to reducing cancer risk. Even more worrisome are recent studies showing that some "inactive ingredients" of commercial herbicide formulations are detrimental to our health and can work synergistically to worsen the impact of "active ingredients."

There is good reason that the Canadian Cancer Society has made campaigns to reduce pesticides, and has recommended that "pesticides should only be used when they are needed to protect our health, safety or food supply." In the context of urban spaces, I would be hard pressed to imagine a scenario in which pesticides would be protecting our health or our safety. It is often proposed that herbicides are used to control allergens, but let's face it, dandelions are the most common target of herbicides. As it turns out, dandelion pollen is very heavy and rarely ever reaches the human nose (so generally non-allergenic) and at the same time, its pollen is an early food source for beneficial insects. The idea that sports fields cannot be maintained without herbicides is antiquated, as there are many alternatives. The promoters of pesticides also propagate the idea that home-made brews are somehow dangerous, which is absurd since they are often made from kitchen foods or herbs. On the other hand, when we study 2,4-D and glyphosate in my lab, we must wear full protective gear. The newest piece of misinformation and green washing is that pesticide use in green spaces can somehow encourage biodiversity, but in fact pesticides are highly detrimental to biodiversity, vastly reducing it.

Let's do a simple thought experiment: your neighbour sprays herbicides on their lawn. There will be significant drift onto your lawn during or after the spray, which will be easily tracked by foot into your house by pets, kids and adults. Since most of us don't have HEPA filters in our homes and herbicides remain stable in an unnatural environment, those chemicals will circulate in our household until they are absorbed through our skin or inhaled. Even worse, imagine your toddler (or pet) playing in the yard when the spray takes place (people are under no obligation to notify of a spray in their own yard) and pops some grass into their mouth, as toddlers do. Now your child/pet has directly ingested pesticide. How can we conscientiously risk their health simply to conform to an aesthetic? There are so many viable lawn care alternatives that we simply don't need pesticides for home lawns.

Think of how many lives would have been saved if governments had used the precautionary principle and not pandered to the tobacco companies. Let's do the right thing this time and regulate pesticide use in Regina.

Tanya Dahms is a biochemistry professor at the University of Regina and mother to a six-year-old.