

## GENETICALLY MODIFIED FOODS

*The Public Health Association of Australia notes that:*

1. There is considerable controversy over the production and use of genetically modified (GM) foods because of concerns over health, environmental, social, economic, ethical and political effects of these foods<sup>1,2,3</sup>
2. Proponents of GM food argue that gene technology has the potential to be useful in enhancing the quality, safety, nutritional value and variety of food available for human consumption and in increasing the efficiency of food production and processing<sup>2,4</sup>
3. Critics of GM food warn that there is insufficient evidence that these foods are safe for humans and the environment. The global economic, social, ethical and political implications are largely unknown, but some of the information which does exist points to deleterious effects on health, the environment and on the social and economic milieu, particularly in developing countries<sup>5,6</sup>
4. The introduction of GM food in Australia has preceded the development of appropriate regulatory frameworks, and the current arrangements for the management of genetic engineering are piecemeal and are not clearly delineated or co-ordinated.<sup>7</sup> It is understood that the proposed Gene Technology Office, which was foreshadowed in the 1999-2000 budget, will not be operational until 2001<sup>8</sup>
5. Standard A18 of the Food Standards Code,<sup>9</sup> which defines GM food, specifies the requirements for pre-market approval and labelling and prohibits the sale of GM food unless included in the standard, came into force on May 13 1999. So far two applications have been approved. However, numerous GM foods which have not been assessed remain in the marketplace. This is in accordance with the Standard because of an ANZFSC decision, in March 1999, to allow these foods to remain on sale pending assessment, provided that applications were submitted by 30 April 1999. There are currently 18 applications awaiting ANZFA assessment<sup>10</sup>
6. A critique by a PHAA member, of the ANZFA safety assessment procedure for Round Up Ready Soybeans,<sup>11</sup> which relies on the data submitted by the applicant (ie Monsanto), and is not independently evaluated, has raised concerns over the appropriateness and adequacy of the testing

7. There is insufficient data on the long term effects of the production and use of GM food on humans, animals and the environment <sup>6</sup>
8. There is much consumer uncertainty and concern over GM food and there is strong demand for labelling of all GM food, on health and freedom of choice grounds<sup>1,12,13,14</sup>
9. At their August meeting, the ANZFSC agreed to introduce mandatory labelling of GM foods. However the Health Ministers agreed to exempt genetically modified ingredients that fall under a percentage threshold, without determining what the threshold should be. A working group is scheduled to report back with recommendations concerning the threshold in October 1999.

***The Public Health Association of Australia affirms the following principles:***

10. The primary objectives of food regulation are the protection of public health and safety and the provision of information to consumers to ensure informed decision making.
11. The precautionary principle should be applied in developing GM food as it is not certain whether there are serious risks to the environment or to human health involved in producing or consuming GM foods or their products.
12. The regulatory process should be independent and transparent to ensure public health and consumer interests are foremost.

***The Public Health Association of Australia believes that the following steps should be taken:***

13. The Government should impose an immediate and indefinite freeze on:
  - the growing of GM food crops for commercial purposes
  - the importation of GM foods and food components
  - the patenting of genetic resources for food
14. The establishment of an independent statutory Authority (reporting to the Health portfolio) which undertakes the following:
  - research into the effects of GM foods, including health (human and animal), environmental, social, economic, ethical and political effects and the development of a comprehensive monitoring and surveillance framework to track these effects
  - widespread public consultation about the use of GM foods

- development of a regulatory system to control the production and sale of GM foods
- development of a labelling system so that consumers can easily identify GM and non GM foods and foods with GM ingredients.
- consideration of the effects of intellectual property protection measures.

***The Public Health Association of Australia resolves to:***

15. Advocate for the immediate establishment of an independent gene technology office that will be responsible for all considerations relating to GM food from laboratory to paddock to plate (as detailed above)
16. Advocate for the labelling of all foods (including fresh, processed, packaged, unpackaged, restaurant and fast food) derived from genetic engineering and foods containing ingredients which are the product of genetic engineering, regardless of whether they contain new or altered genetic material and/or protein, and regardless of whether they contain this material below an arbitrary threshold level.
17. Communicate with other public health and consumer groups to enhance advocacy efforts
18. Offer expertise to ANZFA to improve safety assessment procedures.

## **References:**

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***Adopted at the 1999 Annual General Meeting of the Public Health Association of Australia and amended at the 2002 Annual General Meeting.***