

Magazine insert leaves a bad taste

Ottawa pushes safety of bio-engineered food

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The Gazette

The federal government is paying two of the largest consumer magazines in the country, Canadian Living and Coup de Pouce, to publish supplements asserting the safety of genetically engineered food.

The supplements are due to hit the newsstands in early June, packaged into the July 2000 edition.

The supplements are sponsored by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, which falls under the Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food. The agency's stated mission is "to provide safe food, consumer protection and market access."

Since its founding in 1997, however, the CFIA has also become an enthusiastic backer of biotechnology.

"There seems to be a real thirst for information about what we do," said Margaret Kenny, director of the biotechnology office in the CFIA. "These supplements are a vehicle for us to provide balanced, factual, unemotional information about biotechnology and the regulatory system."

Yet critics charge that the CFIA has other agendas in mind apart from providing adequate information to the public.

"The CFIA keeps saying they don't have a dual mandate," said Bradford Duplisea of the Canadian Health Coalition. "But they're blatantly promoting biotechnology. It's a conflict of interest and an inherent contradiction."

"They're not a transparent agency," added Ken Rubin, a public-interest researcher and organic farmer living near Ottawa.

"But they're willing to spend a lot of money on communications strategies."

The supplements are the fruit of a \$302,000 contract awarded in November to Telemedia Communications Inc. of Toronto. At the time, Telemedia owned Canadian Living and Coup de Pouce, along with nine other consumer magazines in both official languages.

In January, all of Telemedia's magazines were bought by GTC Transcontinental Group Ltd.

The CFIA did not hold a public tender before giving out the contract. A government statement announcing the deal said that "Telemedia Communications Inc. has demonstrated strong creative achievements in their Canadian Living publication, which offers an excellent communication network for the resource booklets.

"Canadian Living has a reputation for providing Canadian families with trusted and credible information ... and has in the past published articles on biotechnology."

Last May, the magazine distributed a pro-biotechnology pamphlet called *A Growing Appetite for Information*. It was co-produced by the Consumers Association of Canada and the Food Biotechnology Communications Network, a Guelph, Ont., group that unites government officials with leaders in the biotechnology industry.

On its Web site, the network says that it "is supported by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada."

According to Kerry Mitchell, the publisher of Canadian Living, the editorial content for the new supplement is to be written by members of the magazine's New Business Initiatives Group.

FRONT LINE

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Tell readers who paid for supplement: critic

FOOD

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Coup de Pouce will publish a French translation. Mitchell said it will be clear to readers that the supplement does not form part of the regular magazine.

Yet whereas magazine articles normally arise from independent research on the part of journalists, the information in the supplements will come from the food-inspection agency.

"Biotechnology is a complex issue," Mitchell said in an interview. "But we tackle many complex issues and clarify them for our readers.

"The benefit to the food-inspection agency in having a third party address this is to try to address the consumer concern."

MAGAZINE'S OBLIGATION

Broadcaster Peter Downie, who teaches media ethics for Concordia University's journalism program, said that "it's incumbent on Canadian Living to make it very clear that they're being paid to present this information."

"It's a matter of making sure that the reader knows where the information is coming from. Then it's up to the reader to use his or her own brain."

Ottawa has a strategy to persuade Canadians that the increasing use of genetically engineered foods poses no major risks to public health or the environment. As *The Gazette* reported last month, Industry Canada has given nearly \$6 million to BIOTECanada, the

industry's main lobby group, since 1994 - money aimed at improving the public image of biotechnology.

Even so, surveys show that most Canadians are yet to be convinced. A *Gazette* poll of 966 Montrealers taken in December found almost unanimous support for the mandatory labeling of genetically modified foods - and over half of all respondents thought that such foods should be banned outright. Women were especially likely to distrust the novel foods.

WOMEN KEY TARGETS

To dissipate suspicions about the safety of biotechnology, the industry has chosen to make women the main targets of its public-relations thrust. Women form an overwhelming majority among readers of both magazines.

Anna Hobbs, an associate editor of *Canadian Living*, was the only member of the press invited to two closed-door meetings held in Ottawa in April and December 1999.

The meetings brought federal Agriculture Minister Lyle Vanclief face-to-face with industry leaders from Monsanto Canada, Ag-West Biotech and other companies. Joyce Groote, the president of BIOTECanada, also attended.

Critics are concerned that a public regulatory agency like the CFLA is paying for the promotion.

"There's no question," Ken Rubin said, "that the agency has a definite bias toward helping facilitate the introduction of biotech foods in the marketplace. This does conflict with their public-interest responsibilities."