

# News may harm your health

*Tony Greenfield*

## **It's News!**

Food additives can harm your health. Parents and teachers beware. E-numbers will make your children fight, smash up the house, tear down the curtains, fiddle and never sit still, argue or make any noise that will dement their elders. Medics call them hyperactive and journalists bandy the words of behavioural psychologists and health statisticians as if they have a great discovery to impart to the world and we are all at risk of terrible consequences if we pay no heed.

## **But is it New?**

Certainly, journalists must forward the warnings of science to the wider public. And scientists must quickly announce their findings if they honestly believe there are dangers afoot. Between them, they must also tell us if there are any new developments, including the results of well controlled experiments that confirm or counter earlier understandings.

But how long must we allow for rigorous, well-funded research, peer-reviewed publication, and replications? Children may die. Houses and schools may be scorched.

Way back in 1984 I bought a book called *E for additives; A complete E number guide*, by Maurice Hanssen, published by Thorsons, ISBN 0-7225-1150-7. After my note to RADSTATS about this (6 September 2007), Elizabeth Ricketts of Reading wrote to *The Times* (8 September 2007):

“On page 12 (of *E for Additives*) is a list of additives that the Hyperactive Children's Support Group (HACG) recommends should be avoided.” These include all those listed in *The Times* (6 September) and some more. She notes that these are already banned in some countries and asks “Why has it taken 30 years to unequivocally link these additives with hyperactivity? And why have our government and the EU allowed the continued poisoning of our children?”

These are strong words but should we sympathise? Parents must be concerned about un-bridled adversities, especially such hyperactivity so extreme that it drives grand parents bananas. As scientists, we must also be concerned that any possible risk to the health of children should be widely believed for so long and yet should remain uncontrolled.

But do the strong words correctly report the findings of the study? Unequivocal link? Continued poisoning? As scientists we must also be concerned about such emotive interpretation, reporting and comment in the popular media. Is it news? Can we discern facts in so much opinion?

Search the literature and you will find that there have been many studies about this and much written.

The latest research, reported in *The Lancet*, was by “scientists from the University of Southampton”, according to *The Times*, and “led by Jim Stevenson, head of psychology”.

Further quotes in *The Times* include:

Richard Watts of Sustain:

“The (food standards) agency needs to toughen up the rules quickly”.

Ian Truelove of the Food Commission:

“Manufacturers should clean up their act and remove these additives, which are neither needed nor wanted in our food”.

Clare Baynton of the FSA:

“The matter has to be resolved by the European Commission..... The additives are safe and approved for use in food.....further assessment is required ....The onus is on parents to monitor their children’s diets.”

Julian Hunt of the Food and Drink Association:

“ ..the study does not suggest there is a safety issue ...the way in which the additives were tested as a mixture is not how they are used in everyday products.”

And by Andrew Wadge, FSA chief scientist on Radio 4, Today (6 September 2007):

“Although it (the study) is suggestive of a link, it’s an association. It is not proving causality” even though this “randomised double-blinded, placebo-controlled, crossover trial” (funded by the FSA) was designed to avoid this ambiguity.

Since then, Jim Stevenson has been attributed as saying that no previous study has been scientifically rigorous but his was. Did he say it?

So what do we make of all this?

Return to the recommendation in *E for additives*. This was based on the work of Ben Feingold, a paediatric allergist from California, who proposed in 1973 that salicylates, artificial colours, and artificial flavours cause hyperactivity in children. Visit his website (<http://www.feingold.org/pg-research.html>) and you will find that his work was replicated many times and based on large samples, so perhaps the same criticisms as were levelled at the MMR scare do not apply. But, without deep study, none of us can be sure how rigorous was the work. However, in view of the alleged dangers to all children, we must share the shock of Elizabeth Ricketts that more than 30 years have passed without action. We now await a review of this mess by the EU before the FSA can act.

We don’t want scares. Newspapers and other broadcasters apparently believe that scares sell their wares, so they keep trying to scare us. They would not like a reporter, when asked “Any news?” to reply “Not a single new”. He must feed copy that will shock, sensationalise and scare.

But nor do we want avoidable risks. How can we compromise? This is a question for you, dear reader. I don’t know.

Discuss.

Urgently.

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