

MADGE (Mothers Are Demystifying Genetic Engineering) speakers Madeleine Love from Benalla, Jessica Harrison from Wonthaggi & Fran Murrell from Fitzroy addressed an audience of 38 people on Tuesday 11th November at the Foster Community Health Centre. The meeting was designed to attract food service providers in the local area and inform them of the nature of GM foods, the concerns regarding their safety & how to source GM free foods.

Foster food outlets represented included South Gippsland Hospital kitchen, Foster supermarket, butcher, fruit & vegetable store and restaurant owners and staff, Windy Ridge winery, bed & breakfast owners and also The Burra Foodstore in Korumburra.

In addition there were SG councillor Keiran Kennedy, South Gippsland Hospital Director of Nursing & Occupational Therapist & midwife, Foster Community Health Centre District Nurse, Chronic Disease Prevention Nurse & Health Promotion Officer, Toora PS Principal, farmers and interested people from as far away as Nyora, Leongatha, Nerrena, Loch, Buffalo and Wonyip.

The speakers explained how genes are damaged during the GE process, leading to unpredictable changes in the function of the newly created plant. Allergic reactions, toxic reactions, new diseases & nutritional changes can result from the ingestion of damaged plant material.

There is no comparison between age-old natural plant selection & GE (GM) technology, as it has never before been possible to breed offspring from 2 totally unrelated species, e.g. a plant with a bacterium or animal. There is no single drought-proof gene and drought tolerance involves many genes acting together in a way that is not yet understood.

FSANZ (Food Standards Australia & NZ) & OGTR, the government bodies entrusted with ensuring food safety, were exposed as having deficiencies in their processes such that they do no independent testing of GM foods, relying entirely on the information supplied to them by the biotech companies who own the patent on the GM crop.

FSANZ has also given the responsibility to monitor for any adverse human health outcomes to the GM companies themselves, and there have been no studies to say whether GM food has been safe to eat.

The AMA (Australian Medical Association) and the PHAA (Public Health Association of Australia) are calling for improved labelling of GM foods and a monitoring/reporting system to enable doctors who suspect a person may have had a reaction to GM foods to alert the health department about it.

FSANZ has a code for labelling of GM foods which states that all GM ingredients are to be labelled where they contain novel DNA or protein, or have altered characteristics.

However, FSANZ has 'deemed' that highly refined food such as oils, sugars and starches derived from GM crops do not have protein and don't need to be labelled, even though it is stated in FSANZ's safety assessment document that canola oil contains 0.229 ppm protein. Each ingredient can have up to 1% of accidental contamination. GM food additives, processing aids and flavours at 0.1% also do not have to be labelled.

A September Newspoll revealed that 90% of Australians want all GM ingredients to be labelled, and the PHAA & many concerned individuals are demanding full labelling, monitoring and enforcement. It is by no means easy to know exactly which foods contain GM ingredients. Ingredients such as "soy lecithin", "vegetable oil" & "hydrolysed vegetable protein", may or may not be GM.

Most consumers do not want to eat GM foods & food outlets are aware of this. In addition to many foods such as corn, canola & soy products, almost 300 food additives are GM derived, eg. aspartame in diet drinks & corn syrup in some soft drinks & cordials.

Mr Bill Statham, author of "The Chemical Maze" which lists over 1500 food additives & describes their health effects, was present to answer questions about these products.

Some foods such as soy milk are often labelled GM free & people should look for this on the packaging, whereas others such as canola-containing products are not labelled as FSANZ does not require oils & other refined products to be labelled,.

Since a supermarket chain in SA, Foodland, has declared they may offer a GM free food section, more supermarkets in Victoria are starting to realise the potential attraction of following suit. Leo's in Kew has had a GM free tour conducted by MADGE to help staff & customers identify which foods they prefer to buy.

A large UK Hospital, The Royal Brompton, has changed their menu for patients & staff to GM free organic food, in recognition of the health benefits to everyone, especially sick people, & also to the environment.

The South Gippsland Shire has been declared GM crop free last month, joining Bass & East Gippsland & Bendigo shires. Restaurant owners & health & food services in the area are now in a position to consider moving towards a GM free food ideal.

MADGE is calling for expressions of interest from businesses who would like to access information about the GM status of any foods they use in catering & food sales. Please contact Ms Jessica Harrison in the Bass area (mob 0407 307 231), Ms Bev Mustchin in the Leongatha area (Ph/...) Dr Barbara Hoare (c/- 56822088) in the Foster area or contact MADGE at info@madge.org.au. The MADGE website is www.madge.org.au .