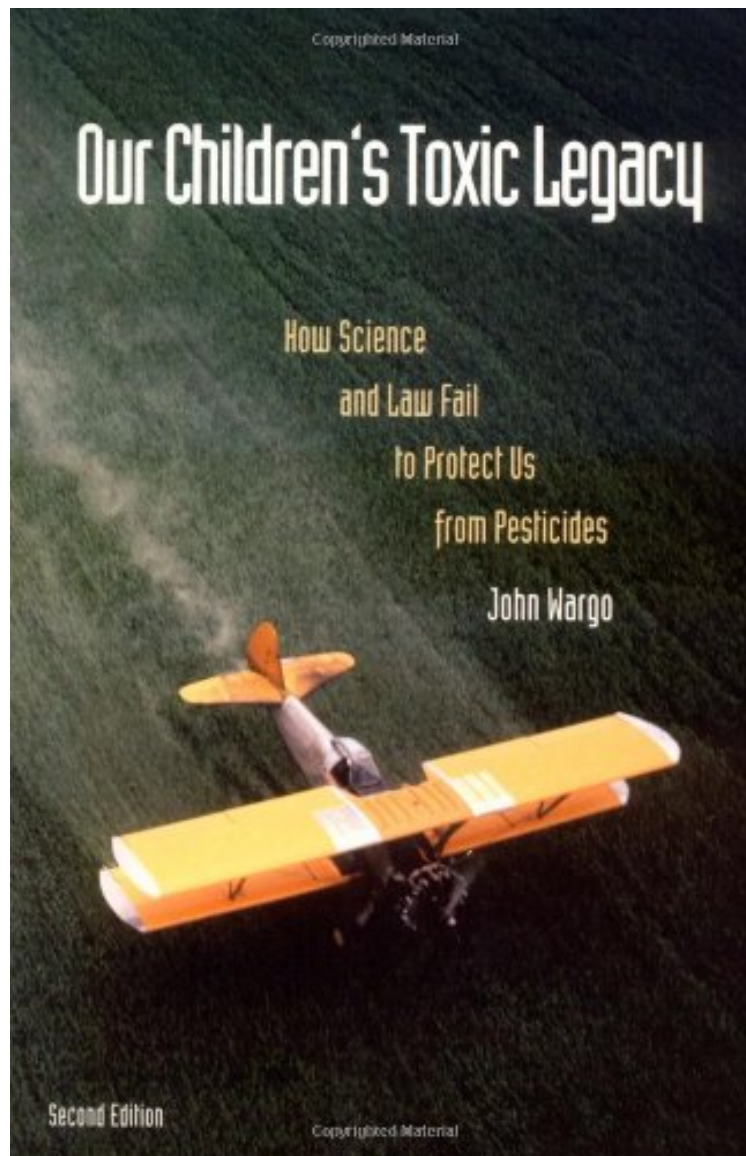


(Mobile ebook) Our Children's Toxic Legacy: How Science and Law Fail to Protect Us from Pesticides

Our Children's Toxic Legacy: How Science and Law Fail to Protect Us from Pesticides

John Wargo

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more law and politics than science

By F. R. Anscombe

Toxic Legacy is ably written, a great virtue. Clear writing helps navigate an arcane topic in which the author is well-versed. The book provides an interesting assortment of photographs of DDT uses during World War II and in the home. DDT's inventor received a Nobel prize for its enormous public-health contributions. Wargo focuses on legal issues in the U.S. regarding pesticides. This sidesteps some broader scientific matters. As Wargo notes (p. 127), Bruce Ames and Lois Gold have made a case that the chemical ingredients that naturally make up our foods provide risks that dwarf those from residues of synthetic pesticides. The Ames/Gold argument meets common sense expectations, because foods are consumed in high doses for sustenance. Wargo dodges, because an implication is the triviality of risks posed by pesticide residues (the topic of his book): "it hardly seems prudent to avoid regulating synthetic toxins simply because we are commonly exposed to natural ones." Why overlook 99 percent of the risk (presented by natural ingredients in foods) and only pay attention to pesticide residues? Maybe because it is more popularly appealing to stigmatize synthetic chemicals that protect food supplies. Perhaps like many, the author favors "natural" molecules, yet fears those of human synthesis. This is a dividing line without merit within pharmacology and biochemistry. All living things constitute systems of interacting chemicals. Our choices in foods, drink, and pharmaceuticals very much influence health and development. Plants (fruits and vegetables) naturally contain chemical ingredients to ward off predators. These toxicants collectively present much higher risk than residues of synthetic chemicals used to protect crops against predators and disease agents like fungi, viruses, and bacteria. What are the health tradeoffs between disease agents versus synthetic pesticide residues? Or among various ways of protecting foods against disease agents? These are presumably complicated topics. Synthetic pesticides give many thoughtful people pause and can surely cause harm, if in excess dose (just as with all molecules with the biochemistry of Nature). They deserve to be carefully managed by applicators. For decades, the U.S. has had ways of regulating pesticides to minimize unwanted impacts. Because children are more vulnerable to any chemicals, Wargo may contribute constructive suggestions, within the arcane field of pesticide regulation. Yet the provocative subtitle, *How Science and Law Fail to Protect Us from Pesticides*, seems hyperbole. It is common for environmental scientists to analyze only a few pesticides present within the environment. When found, these few may be stigmatized and their use curtailed. This can produce an illusion of risk reduction, based on narrow analytic chemistry. In reality, society uses a great number of pesticides, and the residues of all can be detected, when sought. There is no holistic consideration of whether aggregate pesticide levels in the environment today pose greater or lesser risk than before cancelling DDT and other pesticides. Wargo may be unmindful of this larger surrounding context, trusting in the scientific understanding within the environmental industrial complex he is endeavoring to improve. The author seems highly conscientious in intention and this is praiseworthy.

For the reader interested in chemicals and health:-- J. Rodricks. 1991. *Calculated Risks: understanding the toxicity and human health risks of chemicals in our environment*. Cambridge U. Press--Geoffrey Kabat. 2008. *Hyping Health Risks: environmental hazards in daily life and the science of epidemiology*. Columbia Univ. Press.-- Cass R. Sunstein. 2005. *Laws of Fear: beyond the precautionary principle*. Cambridge Univ. Press.-- John Emsley. *The Consumer's Good Chemical Guide*. W.H. Freeman-- W. Baarschers. *eco-facts eco-fiction*. Routledge Press.-- Aaron Wildalsky. 1995. *But is it True?: a citizen's guide to environmental health and safety issues*. Harvard Univ. Press.-- John F. Ross. *Living Dangerously: navigating the risks of everyday life*. (Perseus)-- National Research Council. *Carcinogens and Anticarcinogens in the human diet*. National Academy Press.

During this century, hundreds of billions of pounds of pesticides have been released to the global environment. How are we exposed to them? What can we do to protect ourselves? In this extraordinary analysis, John Wargo, one of the nation's leading experts in pesticide policy, traces the history of pesticide law and science, with a focus on the special hazards faced by children. By 1969, nearly 60,000 separate pesticide products were registered for use by the U.S. government, each with the expectation that pesticides could be used safely, that they quickly broke down into harmless substances, or that dangerous levels of exposure could be accurately predicted and somehow avoided. Faith in these assumptions was gradually eroded as experts grew to understand the persistence, movement, and toxicity of the chemicals involved. Nevertheless, government continues to hold the discretion to balance risks against economic benefits in its licensing decisions. The underlying legal strategy, Wargo claims, has been one that places extraordinary faith in government's ability to somehow ensure that only safe levels of contamination and exposure occur. And the effect has been systematic neglect of those exposures and risks faced by children. Wargo presents a compelling case that children are more heavily exposed to some pesticides than adults and are especially vulnerable to some adverse effects. How should the fractured body of environmental law be repaired to manage the distribution of risk? This is the central question Wargo addresses as he suggests fundamental reforms of science and law necessary to understand and

contain the health risks faced by children.