

Looking at media views – GM foods

Many stories and points of view are presented to us in media stories. Is the information scientifically accurate and complete? Is the point of view being expressed biased or designed to persuade the reader to a particular point of view? What should we look for in order to answer these questions?

In this activity, you will work in groups and individually to analyse four newspaper stories about GM foods. Then, come to a personal conclusion about the answer to the question 'Would I eat GM foods?'

You will need:

- the four newspaper articles provided with this activity sheet
- access to newspaper, magazine articles or the TV news for a few days (your teacher may provide some newspaper or magazine clippings or video clips).

What to do:

Work in a group.

1. Read each of the articles and summarise in one or two sentences what is being said in each one. Is the person being quoted for or against the availability of GM food?
2. Put your group's summary for each article on a display board with those of the other groups in the class under one of these headings: FOR, AGAINST or NEUTRAL.
3. Each group taking a different article should:
 - make a list of which of the points in the article is fact and which is an opinion. Is it hard to tell the difference?
 - decide who would benefit most if the point of view presented in the article was accepted by the public. Does this mean that the person quoted would benefit?
 - decide whether you feel the people being quoted are telling the full story, part of the story, or just giving their points of view.
 - why do you think this person is writing the article?
4. Select a member of your group to present your conclusions to the class.
5. Having listened to all the group reports, decide on your answer to the question 'Would I eat genetically modified food?' There is no right or wrong answer.

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6. Write an answer in the form of a press release that quotes you as a member of the public. You may combine points from two or more of the articles you have read to give a more balanced view, or you may write a completely new article.
7. Look in newspapers or magazines or watch the TV news for a story about GM foods. You could also search for web sites that present views on GM food. Analyse each story or article to decide whether it is balanced or if there is a possible vested interest behind opinions being put forward. Look for facts, opinions, if someone will benefit if the point of view presented is accepted, and if the whole story is being presented. Write a report on the story.

The media stories

Story 1: BioDisco Inc. releases new GM oats

Executives at BioDisco Inc. yesterday released details about a new GM high-protein oat variety.

Gary Beaker, Chief Executive of BioDisco, believes the new oat variety is a huge step forward in plant biotechnology.

'This new oat variety is based on Ant-I-Oat, the insect-resistant oat variety BioDisco released last year,' he said.

'The new variety has the added bonus of added proteins, which will help increase the nutrition of this crop, especially for those in developing countries who have oats as their staple diet.

'The original Ant-I-Oat has proven to be very valuable in reducing the amount of pesticide required to protect the oats from insects, with some farmers experiencing a reduction in chemical use of 80% compared with conventional oat varieties. The bonus protein of the new crop will make it a sure-fire winner in the marketplace,' said Mr Beaker.

Mr Beaker stood by the company's commitment to develop new crops using biotechnology. 'Not one peer-reviewed scientific article has yet been published that shows that foods created using biotechnology pose any dangers to human health. We should forge ahead with the technology and bring farmers, the community and our country's economy all the benefits that gene technology can bring. To do otherwise, and not allow people to access the advantages of this revolution in science, would be criminal,' he said.

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Story 2: Protestors march at anti-GM food rally

Traffic stopped for more than two hours in central Sydney yesterday as anti-GM food protestors stormed the offices of Dishy Foods, producers of Yummy Corn Snax and Tasty Soy Treats.

Leader of the 'GM Free for Me' organising group, David Snell, said he was pleased with the results of yesterday's action. 'Dishy Foods likes to give its customers the impression that their foods are healthy and they care for our environment, but how can they, when they're using GM ingredients? It's appalling.

'People need to know that basically Dishy see us as guinea-pigs for this new, untested technology.'

Mr Snell is convinced of Dishy Foods' motivation for using GM ingredients. 'The GM stuff is cheaper, so they use it. They don't care about how these crops will damage our world forever - superweeds, mutant viruses escaping into nearby plants; not to mention how our health, and our children's health will be affected. It'll be like mad cow disease - people tell us that everything's fine, but then it all starts to fall apart. We can't trust people who see us as just a way to make profits.'

'I've heard people say that GM foods will be a way to feed the world - I just don't believe it, when profit-hungry multinationals are the ones who own the technology,' Mr Snell said.

Mr Snell said one way to avoid being used as 'pawns for profits' was to buy from backyard growers such as himself, who used minimal intervention when growing their crops.

Story 3: Octavio bans GM food from shop shelves

In a move applauded by consumer groups across the country, national supermarket chain Octavio has banned all food containing genetically modified organisms from its shelves.

Octavio general manager, Mr Rod Brock, said that the move was a look to the future of retailing. 'No other supermarket chain gives shoppers the opportunity to go totally GM-free,' he said.

'We're occupying a market sector that no other retailer has been gutsy enough to take. The move away from GM food has been something consumers have been looking for, for a long time. We're giving people what they want.'

Octavio's home-branded products have been labelled GM-free for one year now, and have been huge sellers, requiring Octavio to go abroad for GM-free food to satisfy demand.

'Yes, it does cost more, but people are willing to pay the price to know that the food they're eating is safe. "Frankenfoods" haven't been proven safe and our customers just don't want to risk it,' said Mr Brock.

Julie Sanders, a regular shopper at Octavio's in Serra City, said she was pleased that Octavio's had introduced its new policy on GM foods.

'I'm really worried about what I feed my kids, who are one and three years old. I've also read that these crops can create all sorts of troubles like superpests and superweeds. I care about the environment and want to do what I can to preserve it. Shopping at Octavio's gives me peace of mind about my family's health and the environment,' she said.

Story 4: Northern American Gene Regulator visit ends

The Head of the Northern American Regulatory Agency (NARA) controlling genetic research and development, Ms Sally Toothey, finished her whirlwind tour of Australia with a press conference at the National Press Club in Canberra today.

During her one-week visit around the country, Ms Toothey has discussed how gene research is conducted in Northern America and provided some recommendations she hopes Australia will follow.

'Basically we see that gene technology can offer our countries and the wider world huge commercial and humanitarian benefits, so we want to allow industry to be able to develop without being overly regulated,' Ms Toothey said.

'Adhering to cumbersome over-regulation costs companies and governments huge amounts of money, and often prevents scientific discovery and innovation or makes it very difficult. Over-regulation also means that products take longer to come to market and to provide the benefits they were created for. All the scientific evidence indicates that foods produced using gene technology are safe. We believe that the end-product, and not the process, should be the focus of regulations,' Ms Toothey said.

'You also have to remember that companies will do everything in their power to make sure their products are safe. No company's reputation could cope with an unsafe product landing on the shelves - they'd be financially crushed,' she said.

Ms Toothey will visit New Zealand before returning to Northern America next week.