

A "Johnny Come-Lately" Intervention

13 July 2004 | News



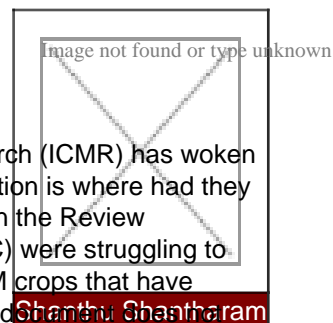
GUEST COLUMN

A "Johnny Come-Lately" Intervention

The ICMR paper on GM foods lacks scientific aptness.

It is a welcome sign that the country's premier medical research body, Indian Council for Medical Research (ICMR) has woken up from its slumber to publish a "draft" position paper on how GM foods should be regulated. The question is where had they been all these years when controversies about the food safety of GM crops have been raging and when the Review Committee on Genetic Manipulation (RCGM) and the Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC) were struggling to develop regulatory standards to determine the allergenicity and toxicity of Bt-cotton and many other GM crops that have come under their purview. May be they were there, but no one noticed. It is really curious that the draft of the paper does not mention anyone in authority at ICMR and nor is there a clue whether the document had been whetted by other ministries who have an interest in the subject. There is also no indication as to whom to contact at ICMR regarding the document's contents. Certainly, there is no indication that there were any wide-ranging stakeholder consultations before drafting the paper. Business as usual?

The position paper cannot seem to distinguish between market dominance and market monopoly, and goes on to talk senselessly about how certain biotech companies will control the food chain and how small farmers will be denied access to



the technology. These kinds of socio-economic concerns do not belong in the realm of ICMR's competence and should not have been dealt with in such a cavalier manner. This is a good example as to why a regulatory authority of any technology should not be in-charge of judging socio-economic impacts of a technology. They should be left to real experts who live and work in the academia and without a doubt will be finally decided by the market place once the technology products hit the market.

The document asserts a regulatory role for ICMR in assessing the food safety of GM foods, but do they know that RCGM and GEAC are already doing it by the seat of their pants? Does the ICMR know a new report on regulatory reforms has been submitted to the Ministry of Agriculture by MS Swaminathan panel? ICMR seems to know not! Scientifically the document is inept at best, throws up the much hackneyed "genetic pollution", have no knowledge of the fact that there has not been any observed field based resistance to Bt-toxin and certainly is oblivious to the fact that GM pollen has not destroyed any biodiversity. Wonder why all these seemingly environmental issues needed to be brought forth in a document that purports to deal with GM food safety? Surprisingly, it does not talk of any international standards used for assessing food safety. The document suggests that available biochemical, toxicological and molecular techniques are not sensitive enough to assess health risks is a clear betrayal of lack of any information and knowledge of the subject matter on the part of the author(s) of the document. It is appalling that such an important paper as the one dealing with the regulation of GM foods be published by a premier body like ICMR at a time when there is so much misinformation, disinformation, and baseless scare-mongering is going on about the GM technology around the world. ICMR, instead of being a source of sound scientific information and knowledge, in its first document on the subject missed out a great opportunity to better inform the public.

Shanthu Shantharam, Biologistics International LLC, Ellicott City, MD 21042