

Sickening Relations: The Royal Society and the GMO-Agrochemical Sector

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The Royal Society in the UK is a self-governing fellowship of distinguished scientists. Its purpose is reflected in its [founding charters of the 1660s](#): to recognise, promote and support excellence in science and to encourage the development and use of science for the benefit of humanity. Its motto, [nullius in verba](#), is taken to mean ‘take nobody’s word for it’. It is an expression of the determination to withstand the domination of authority and to verify all statements by an appeal to facts based on experiment.

In 2015, Steven Druker (image below) challenged the Royal Society to justify its outspoken and partisan support of genetically modified (GM) crops and to correct any errors of fact in his book ‘Altered Genes, Twisted Truth’. Not long after the book’s release, he wrote an [open letter](#) to the Society calling on it to acknowledge and correct the misleading and exaggerated statements that it has used to actively promote genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and in effect convey false impressions.

Druker cited specific instances where members of the Royal Society have at various times made false statements and the Society’s actions were not objective or based on scientific reasoning but biased and stridently pro-GMO. He argued that the Royal Society has misrepresented the case for GMOs and has effectively engaged in a campaign of disinformation.



Almost three years later, from what we can gather, the Royal Society has not responded to Druker.

In August 2017, Druker [wrote](#):

“For more than 20 years, many eminent scientists and scientific institutions have routinely claimed that genetically modified foods are safe. And because of the perceived authority of their pronouncements, most government officials and members of the media have believed them. But when the arguments

these scientists employ to support their claims are subjected to scrutiny, it becomes clear that important facts have invariably been misrepresented — either deliberately or through substantial negligence. And when these facts are fairly considered, the arguments collapse.”

He goes on to discuss an inaccurate publication on GM foods issued by the Royal Society in May 2016, [GMO Plants: Questions and Answers](#), which claims to provide “unbiased” and “reliable” answers to peoples’ most pressing questions.

In his analysis of the document, Druker reveals that it displays a strong pro-GMO bias and that several of its assertions are demonstrably false. He says that his analysis has major implications:

“If the world’s oldest and most respected scientific institution cannot argue for the safety of GM foods without systematically distorting the facts, it indicates that such distortion is essential to the argument.”

That too must apply to individual members of the Royal Society. For example, during his recent visits to India, Sir Richard John Roberts has consistently lobbied for GMO agriculture, regardless of the fact that five high-level official reports state it is inappropriate for India.

The [most recent report](#) states that unless the bio-safety and socioeconomic desirability is evaluated by a participatory, independent and transparent process and a retrieval and accountability regime is put in place, no GM crop should be introduced in the country.

And who could argue with that given the story of GMOs in India [has thus far been that of](#) “blatant violations of biosafety norms, disregarding of federal polity, unscientific protocol, hasty approvals, lack of monitoring abilities, general apathy towards the hazards of contamination and other issues, lack of institutional oversight mechanisms...”

This doesn’t matter to Roberts though, who deems it necessary to lobby for GM by relying on claims about the benefits of GM that [do not stack up under scrutiny](#) and spends a good deal of time launching emotionally-driven attacks on critics. He fails to appreciate where science ends and spin begins.

His claims are not just outrageous but wholly irresponsible given the outright [regulatory delinquency and scientific fraud](#) that dogs GM in India as well as the latest stories about the [failure of GM cotton](#) (India’s only GM crop) and the dire consequences for over four million farmers and 20 million more who rely on them.

Roberts must feel his distortions and inflammatory statements about critics are, as Druker says, essential to his argument.

Are we dealing with a scientific priesthood whose authority is meant to trump reason?

Royal Society accused of collusion with agrochemical industry

In a [new, fully-referenced 45-page open letter](#), environmentalist Dr Rosemary Mason is strident in her criticism of the Royal Society:

“The Royal Society of London has thrown its hand in with the agrochemical industry, has received funding from it and accepted its word that GM crops are safe. The scientists who founded The Royal Society (Wren, Boyle, Wilkins and Newton) would turn in their graves.”

Rosemary Mason’s letter is addressed to Venkatraman Ramakrishnan, president of the Royal Society. She sets out in some detail the disturbing effects of the rising use of agrochemicals on human health, the environment, biodiversity and ecology in the UK and beyond.

As she notes, many have sounded the alarm over global mass poisoning as a result of tens of thousands of synthetic chemicals entering world markets with no evidence of safety. It has reached the point where we now have an ‘ecological Armageddon’ after a dramatic plunge in insect numbers.

Given Mason’s concerns about the Royal Society’s collusion with corporate interests, she refers Ramakrishnan to the reputation of Monsanto and the findings of the Monsanto Tribunal, the Monsanto Papers and the dozens of lawsuits in the US involving that company.

Aside from engaging in practices that have impinged on the basic human right to a healthy environment, the right to food and the right to health, the Monsanto Tribunal also found that the company has had a negative impact on the right of scientists to freely conduct indispensable research. The Monsanto Papers are based on a release of internal emails which revealed that the company manipulated studies of the company’s herbicide, Roundup. And the lawsuits have been filed on behalf of people alleging that exposure to Roundup herbicide caused them or their loved ones to develop non-Hodgkin lymphoma and that Monsanto covered up the risks.

In accusing the Royal Society of collusion, Mason quotes [Dr Brian John’s open letter](#) to Ramakrishnan’s predecessor Sir Paul Nurse in 2012:

“Why do you see it as part of your job to promote the interests of the GM industry? That industry, whose sole interest in feeding the world is linked to its own desire for total control of both the seed supply and the agricultural supply, needs no help from anybody – and anybody who has eyes to see must realise that corporations like Monsanto, Bayer and Syngenta fully deserve their black reputations... they have long histories of involvement in scientific fraud, bribery, the vilification of independent scientists and other deeply unpleasant activities... they are actively seeking to dismantle the regulatory system... You may not count these corporations among your friends, but if you are promoting GMOs you are also promoting their interests – and it would be disingenuous of you to pretend otherwise.”

Mason mentions specific Royal Society members and organisations that have facilitated the needs of agritech/agrochemicals sector, not least the late Sir Richard Doll who was found after his death to have been paid by Monsanto for 20 years to deny that PCBs and Agent Orange caused cancer.

She quotes another extract from Dr Brian John’s letter to Ramakrishnan:

“... scientists working in the GM field have mounted vicious personal attacks... upon serious scientists who have had the temerity to discover ‘uncomfortable

things about GM crops and foods.’ This trend started with the vitriolic treatment meted out (with the Royal Society in the vanguard) on Arpad Pusztai and Stanley Ewen a decade ago, and continued with the crucifixion of Ignacio Chapela and David Quist, Angelika Hilbeck, Mae-wan Ho, Judy Carman, Gilles-Eric S eralini, Andr s Carrasco, Manuela Malatesta, Christian Velot, Irina Ermakova and many others.”

Whether it involves the Oxford Martin Commission for Future Generations or individual members of the Royal Society, Mason takes aim and highlights statements and actions from fellows of the Society that have less to do with science or factual evidence and more to do with spinning on behalf of corporate interests. The general theme of Mason’s letter is that of the Royal Society or its individual members colluding with industry and throwing the public under the bus of corporate profit.

Mason’s letter is full of highly pertinent points, none more so when she asks Ramakrishnan why Patrick Vallance, head of research and development at British pharmaceuticals giant GlaxoSmithKline (GSK), was elected Fellow of the Royal Society in 2017. His election to the Royal Society was in preparation for his appointment as Chief Scientific Advisor to the UK Government.

Referred to by Mason in her letter, the former editor of the New England Journal of Medicine Marcia Angell reported in 2008 that:

“... over the past two decades the pharmaceutical industry has gained unprecedented control over its own products. Drug companies now finance most clinical research over prescription drugs and there is mounting evidence they often skew the research they sponsor to make their drugs look better and safer.”

On 2 July 2012, GSK pleaded guilty to criminal charges and agreed to a \$3 billion settlement of the largest health-care fraud case in the US, the largest ever payment by a drug company. The settlement is related to the company’s illegal promotion of prescription drugs, its failure to report safety data, bribing doctors and promoting medicines for uses for which they were not licensed.

In her [numerous documents and letters](#) to high-level officials, Mason has noted the all-too-cosy relationships between government, the pharmaceuticals sector and the agrochemical industry. These corporate interests have embedded themselves within the heart of government and research institutes to establish a very profitable relationship.

In effect, corporate money and influence have eroded the integrity of many key institutions. The subversion of public need in favour of private profit has become institutionalised. That much is clear. What is also clear are the devastating consequences on human health, the environment and ecology, which Mason has been describing over the years.

Mason suggests that Ramakrishnan should send her letter to the 1,646 fellows of The Royal Society. They should examine their consciences and decide what should be done to inform British citizens who have a right to know that global mass poisoning with chemicals is why they are so sick and getting progressively sicker.

It would be laudable if this were to happen and Mason were to also receive a proper reply to

the issues set out in her letter. But let's not hold our breath.

Three years down the line, Steven Druker is still waiting for his response!

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