

The Royal Society's Assault on the Science of GM Foods Must Cease

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'Nullius in verba' (Don't take anyone's word for it) – motto and coat of arms of the Royal Society, used in its bookplate. Photo: kladcat via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY).

The Royal Society wants us to take its word that GM crops are safe and healthy, writes Steven Druker. But it refuses to retract its errors, apologise to those whose reputations it has impugned, or enter into constructive debate on the issue. To restore its scientific integrity, it must abide by its own motto.

“Scientific truths are not merely asserted, nor are they created by the authority of the speaker, no matter how eminent. They must be firmly rooted in evidence and rational argument.”

What if an eminent scientific institution had repeatedly promulgated inaccurate and misleading statements about a crucial scientific issue with significant bearing on public health and the future of agriculture?

And what if the president of that institution had been directly informed about the inaccuracies – in a manner that solidly demonstrated their erroneousness – and if he had been formally requested to acknowledge and rectify the errors?

Almost everyone would regard such a request as not only reasonable but compelling – and hence assume that the institution would readily fulfil it. And in most cases, they would be right.

But there's at least one glaring instance in which those expectations would be defied: where the institution is the Royal Society, the world's oldest and most revered scientific association. And where it has misrepresented key facts about genetically modified (GM) crops, instilling the dangerous illusion that their risks are much lower than they actually are.

At a London press conference on 4th March 2015, Dame Jane Goodall and I introduced my new book, [Altered Genes, Twisted Truth](#), which exposes the fraudulent foundation of the GM food venture.

During that event, I issued an [open letter](#) to the Royal Society documenting several false statements it had disseminated to protect the image of these novel foods. I also conveyed this letter via email to the Society's president, Sir Paul Nurse – receipt of which he acknowledged.

The Royal Society's preposterous pretensions

But neither he nor the Society have acknowledged the errors, or provided any reply to the allegations made. Instead, the misrepresentation of reality has been amplified. In response to [media inquiries about the challenge](#), here's the official statement that the institution provides:

"The Royal Society bases its views on evidence, evidence that has been closely scrutinized by people with expert knowledge and that has stood up to that scrutiny. Personal opinions and unsubstantiated anecdotes are unhelpful to having a rational public debate on science and the use of new technologies."

Thus the Society professes that its erroneous statements are based on sound evidence - while dismissing the solidly documented letter that details its errors as mere "*personal opinions and unsubstantiated anecdotes*". Moreover, it pretends to seek a "*rational debate*" - while actually refusing to engage in one.

These pretensions are preposterous. For instance, my letter points out how a 2002 report from the Society tried to make genetic engineering look safe by illegitimately inflating the risks of conventional breeding.

Although there is concrete evidence that genetic engineering can induce the creation of unexpected novel toxins and allergens in the plants it produces - but no evidence that conventional breeding has ever done so - the report claimed that conventional breeding can indeed give rise to such dangers.

And, in a further assault on reason, it tried to prop its claim with a few inapt examples in which well-known toxins that were already present became elevated, but in which not a single new, unexpected toxin was produced.

Worse, not only did the authors employ these invalid examples to bolster their false assertion, they also used them to suggest that the risks of conventional foods are on a par with those of genetic engineering, stating that this purported evidence "*raises the question*" of whether both sets of foods should be required to meet the same safety assessment criteria.

Yet, despite the incontestable invalidity of its claim about the risks of conventional breeding, the Society stubbornly refuses to acknowledge the error. And to compound the arrogance, it contends that by refusing, and by ignoring the request for rectification, it is defending scientific values.

One of the most rigorous ever GMO feeding trials dismissed

Nor has the Society faced up to the fact that it dispensed multiple misrepresentations, and otherwise behaved unethically, in order to discredit the solid, and unsettling, research conducted at the Rowett Institute under the direction of Dr. Arpad Pusztai, one of the world's foremost experts in food safety.

That study is still one of the most rigorous yet performed on a GM food, and it's still highly relevant because it controlled for the effects of the new foreign protein - which entails that

the adverse results it registered were attributable to a broader feature of the genetic engineering process itself. And that is why proponents of GM foods cannot abide it and have ardently attacked it – with the Royal Society leading the charge.

As documented in my letter, first the Society savaged the research without having seen the complete data, which prompted the editor of the *The Lancet* to rebuke it for its “*breath-taking impertinence*.” It then strove to prevent the research from being published. And after the research eventually was published in *The Lancet* despite the attacks, the Society continued to misleadingly malign it.

When such delinquencies were called to its attention, the Society should at minimum have formally retracted its misrepresentations and acknowledged the actual facts.

And for the sake of decency, it should have done more. It should have also fulfilled my request that it issue a formal apology to Dr. Pusztai and his colleagues for the irresponsible manner in which it and several of its members have besmirched their reputations and derided the integrity of their research.

After all, when an esteemed scientific institution has caused such unjustified harm, and when the harm has lasted more than fifteen years, the least it can do is apologize.

The Royal Society’s biased promotion of biotech must cease

How can the Royal Society continue to refuse to correct its misrepresentations? And how can it continue to pass off its irresponsible behaviour as an exemplar of scientific integrity – and its unconscionable acts as commendably conscientious?

Evidently, only because its commitment to upholding the image of GM foods is stronger than its commitment to upholding the truth and the integrity of science. And also only because the government and the media have allowed it to get away with such shameful behaviour.

But the public cannot afford this malfeasance, and its persistence more thoroughly confirms a key assertion of my book: that in regard to GMOs, science has indeed been under attack – but not from those who counsel caution.

Instead, the assault on science has been mounted by GMO proponents; and its main thrust has come from *within*, as hundreds of eminent scientists and scientific institutions have subverted the standards they’ve been entrusted to uphold in order to obfuscate the risks and keep the GM food venture afloat.

Although the Royal Society has been at the fore of this sordid campaign, I believe that the man at its fore – Sir Paul Nurse – does not actually realize the extent to which it has erred. And I suspect that he himself has been misled by the disinformation that’s been routinely dispensed by scientists who *do* know better.

He was not in office when the derelictions detailed in my letter were committed, nor is he a plant biologist; and it seems that he has had to rely on the representations of other scientists in forming his views on GM crops.

Further, because he has emphasized that scientists must maintain “*mental honesty*” and “*open-mindedness*”, it’s reasonable to expect he would investigate a book that’s received such high praise from many experts. If he does, he should be disturbed at

the degree to which the facts have been twisted by scores of scientists - and the prominent role the Society has played in the twisting.

I repeat my invitation: read my book, and tell me of any errors

In my open letter I challenged the Society to list every inaccurate statement of fact it could find in my book, and I set a deadline of 20th April. Although that deadline is long past, my aim is for Sir Paul to learn the actual facts.

Therefore, I again invite him to read my book - this time without the pressure of any deadline; and I offer to meet with him at his convenience to cordially discuss its contents. I further offer to bring along a few biologists who have deep knowledge about the risks of GM crops and can enrich our discussion.

Moreover, because he has stressed the importance of “*self-criticism*” in the practice of science, one would expect him to feel obliged to take remedial action - especially when what’s at stake is not only the integrity of the Royal Society, but the integrity of the food supply.

He should remember the motto of the Royal Society itself: ‘*Nullius in verba*’ - which [roughly translates](#) as ‘Take nobody’s word for it’. Scientific truths are not merely asserted, nor are they created by the authority of the speaker, no matter how eminent. They must be firmly rooted in evidence and rational argument.

Let’s hope that truth, reason and the primacy of evidence prevail.

Steven M. Druker is an American public interest attorney who, as executive director of the [Alliance for Bio-Integrity](#), initiated a lawsuit that exposed how US governmental fraud had enabled the commercialization of GM foods.

The book: [Altered Genes, Twisted Truth: How the Venture to Genetically Engineer Our Food Has Subverted Science, Corrupted Government, and Systematically Deceived the Public](#), was released in March 2015.

[A foreword by Jane Goodall](#) hailed it as “without doubt one of the most important books of the last 50 years.”

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