

**Attacks on organic farming can be taken seriously only when the assailants produce scientific evidence to support their arguments**

**FARMERS WEEKLY TALKING POINT by Lawrence Woodward O.B.E.  
29th April 2005**

**In recent weeks there has been an upsurge in the pastime of knocking organic farming and food.** Normally I look on these attacks with benevolent equanimity – “sad lives, they’d be better off playing dominoes down the pub but if it keeps them off the streets why worry” or similar thoughts – plus the comfort of knowing that every time Mr. Angry, Mr. Righteous Indignation, Mr. Plain Thick or whoever from the hysterical brigade splutters out his opposition there is an increase in the number of organic supporters.

Unfortunately, I couldn’t ignore the Talking Point piece by Geoffrey Hollis (Farmers Weekly April 8-14). It contains the usual stultifying pedantry that cries out to be ignored by sensible people but goes on to levels of distortion that even the Advertising Standards Agency (ASA) might recognise as a travesty.

He recycles views (from the RSPCA) and concerns (from the Farm Animal Welfare Council) that these organisations have expressed in the past but does not acknowledge that neither of these organisations have ever produced a shred of evidence on which those views and concerns can justifiably or rationally be based.

Hollis has made a career pursuing the Soil Association through the complaints procedures of the ASA and has taken the scalps of some sloppy copy- writers. His main argument is based on their failure to produce scientific evidence from comparative trials to justify their claims. Well, “what’s sauce for the goose”!

Neither the RSPCA, FAWC nor Hollis or any of the hysterical brigade have ever come up with a single piece of published research comparing certified, well-managed organic farms with conventional farms that indicates a poorer performance by the organic system on any animal welfare parameter. And that is because none exists.

Take Hollis’s Talking Point: he states; “Mastitis is a challenge for organic dairy herds”, true and so it is for conventional dairy herds; cows that repeatedly suffer from mastitis are “culled early”, yes and so they are in conventional herds; organic beef, pigs and sheep suffer from internal and external parasites, so do conventional ones don’t they? He implies that in all these cases organic livestock management results in worse animal welfare than conventional. In the case of organic poultry – layers and broilers – he states it clearly.

But where is the evidence? He cites “the reports of an EU scientific body”, Sustaining Animal Health and Food Safety in Organic Farming” (SAFO), which is bizarre because it is an EU funded concerted action made up of researchers and institutions (including, on occasions, my own) who are supportive of and developing organic farming. None of the three SAFO reports published to date provides evidence to justify his claims.

What the research work presented in the SAFO reports comprehensively shows is that organic livestock management does work but does not consistently match the aspirations everyone in the organic sector has for it; that although there are very different livestock systems throughout Europe, a systems rather than veterinary input focussed approach is feasible and is successfully practiced on organic farms in all countries; that animal welfare in organic systems is no worse than in conventional systems and, in many instances, shows an improvement.

Organic critics frequently denounce organic farming as unscientific. SAFO demonstrates the opposite. The organic sector is committed to applying sound science in its ongoing development. This science may not be high tech, input driven but, as both DEFRA and the EU have recognised, it is valid. Moreover, organic farmers respond positively to appropriate research and are willing to use valid information from whatever source.

The control of intestinal worms is a good example. The clean grazing system was developed as a management technology by mainstream researchers (i.e. not organic ideologues). These systems are at the core of organic livestock production but are, to a large extent, ignored by conventional farmers. Kits to monitor faecal egg counts are a relatively new development from mainstream science but, I would suggest, are used by a relatively disproportionate large number of organic livestock farmers.

In other areas, such as homoeopathy, practice runs ahead of current scientific methodology. Homoeopathy is not, as Hollis states, a front line strategy. Some organic farmers use it, others don't. In time, I am sure the scientific method will develop to understand and explain its potential and limits. Meanwhile, it is baseless to suggest that those farmers using homoeopathy are causing animals to suffer unnecessarily.

Like many of Hollis' views it is also offensive to many decent farmers. It really would be better if he took up dominoes.