

# Chemical reaction

read the article by Margot Gordon, "Auslander, food and formaldehyde," in *Excalibur* with a growing feeling of despair. If this represents an intelligent discussion of environmental problems by the York community, then God save us all.

The desire to produce a healthy environment is a laudable one indeed, and certainly one any ethical scientist would hope to promote. As president of the Association of the Chemical Profession of Ontario, I can assure Gordon and Auslander that this is one of our cornerstone concerns.

To suggest that properly conducted scientific research gives results dependent on the nature of the funding agency is an insult to generations of dedicated, highly trained professionals who have worked quietly behind the scenes in poorly paid positions to keep up with the exponentially escalating demands homo-sapiens make upon the environment.

It is very true that scientists have had little impact on the political and legislative aspects of environmental control, and one can legitimately ask why this should be so. A couple of reasons spring to mind. The first is the nature of scientific training which places limits on the scope of any investigation and also emphasizes logical deduction rather than adversarial argument. An extreme example would be asking for scientific proof of the existence of God. A second reason is related to the amount of time and money scientists can call upon, which is probably the major factor in developing the effective adversarial stance essential for successful

lobbying in a parliamentary system.

A classic example is the current state of our health and safety laws whereby your local store is free to shelve, ship and dispense many of the materials which are of concern to Gordon and Auslander, as manufactured products, with inadequate labelling and inventory control laws to the point where serious scientific enquiry becomes effectively choked. Many research laboratories have had to dump their chemical supplies and curtail their research activities in the last year or so.

These same types of "do good" laws have also caused vast quantities of materials, at vast sums of money, to be moved from places where they were localized and under the control of professionals to other places scattered around the globe. One can only cringe at the thought of how much pollution was caused by moving PCB containing oil from Quebec, twice across the Atlantic and back to Quebec. How many tons of diesel fuel converted into carbon dioxide and gallons of used metal contaminated engine oil leaked into the ocean? And, when the real danger of physical violence manifested itself, the news media felt obliged to review the entire situation with regard to the real hazards of the substance.

Auslander appears to be dissatisfied with the GRAS list which was generated in 1958, apparently failing to recognize that any other course of action would have totally closed down the global economy. It has to be realized that there is not enough money, time or trained personnel to adequately

monitor even one per cent of the materials which are discovered each year, many of which are from natural sources. It is quite possible that some vegetable plant somewhere has a chemical component that would quickly cure AIDS.

Even if this were serendipitously found (an increasingly unlikely event in today's socio-political atmosphere), it would take trillions of dollars and at least 10 years of testing before it could be legally released. As it is, we are limited to selecting one or two avenues of approach, based on informed but probably biased guesswork, to produce one or two types of chemical substance which are partially effective. Then the available money and personnel and time are poured into these couple of items.

Would Auslander prefer the resources be used to find out whether item A and item B, used since biblical times, might cause lesions in rats? Come on, give us a break!

How on earth can any sane and rational person talk about boric acid as a chemical free alternative? Boric acid is a chemical, as are: baking soda (sodium bicarbonate); washing soda (sodium carbonate heptahydrate); borax (sodium borate); vinegar (4 per cent acetic acid); and liquid soap (this can be a variety of synthetically produced materials).

Also, every substance in your body is a "chemical," including some very potent and toxic ones. Testosterone, a primary agent in the development of prostate and other cancers is just one example. Even formaldehyde can be found

in fresh blood as a by-product of living. Many very dangerous substances are formed by the body as a result of injury or emotional excitement. The PCB demonstrators in Quebec undoubtedly did themselves internal harm by their rage.

So please, let's stop using the "market-assessment" selected trade names to hide the fact that in all cases we are dealing with chemical substances.

Let us stop allowing "market consultants" and advisors obscure facts, confuse and fool the public. It is indeed noble that Auslander's husband, a market consultant, is concerned about the environment. Perhaps he should stop and consider the major problems of pollution to which his trade in hand has contributed.

Fumes from paints are due to the evaporation of the solvents and agents which serve to present paint in a form that can be manipulated out of the can and onto your wall. The colours and tints in the paint are pigments which do not evaporate (they would be useless if they did) and are chosen to not decompose. With very few exceptions the pigments used today are as non-toxic as they can be.

It is a sobering thought to realize that many of the early pigments were in fact the very "earth pigments" Auslander refers to as non-toxic. Included among these are: malachite green (a copper compound); orpiment (an arsenic compound); galena (a lead compound); not to mention a variety of toxic organic dyes. Which would you prefer to use, a chemically identified substance, be it from natural or industrial sources, with

known properties, or some unknown material labelled "earth pigment" of unknown and possibly variable composition?

If retailers are serious about cutting down on possible toxic or irritating fumes from paints, may I suggest a visit to Europe where a bar of paint can be purchased, which can be applied like a crayon with the absolute minimum use of solvents (which are the major problem with paints anyway). Why is such a product not available here? It surely can't be due to a scientific reason or problem. Could it be a marketing problem?

The biggest error of people like Auslander and Gordon is that they are unable to realize they are a serious part of the problem. Assuming they write what they believe, it is obvious that the level of their basic knowledge is low. Their demands for changes in this and that are no different from the demands of the so-called spend-crazed consumers they so deplore.

There is no other solution to pollution but to use less and waste less of everything. The incredible idea that substitutions with "more natural" or changes to "less convenient" products will suffice is beyond belief.

There is nothing more natural than horse-shit. There are probably few less convenient modes of transport than horseback. Can you even begin to imagine what York campus would be like if everyone came here by horse? If you can, give Metro Toronto a moment of your thoughts.

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## ANNOUNCEMENT

York University will review claims for reimbursement from students who incurred extraordinary and unavoidable out of pocket expenses as a direct result of difficulties encountered in initial attempts to enrol in courses for the Fall/Winter 1989/90 Session through the Voice Enrolment System.

Claim forms with information sheets and return envelopes will be available beginning Friday, September 15, at the following locations:

Office of Student Affairs, 124 Central Square  
your office of Student Programmes

Completed claims forms, with relevant documentation, must be submitted by Friday, October 6, 1989. Please use the envelopes provided, and the inter-campus mail boxes located on campus.

Office of the Registrar  
September 9, 1989

KEEP IN MIND  
THE LAST DAY TO PAY ACADEMIC FEES  
FOR FALL TERM AND FULL SESSION COURSES  
IS

FRIDAY  
SEPTEMBER 29  
1989

Student who have not paid their academic fees and the applicable late service charges to complete the registration process by this date will be de-enrolled and their Fall Term and Full Session courses will be cancelled.

Anyone wishing to register after this date must submit a written petition to the Registration Office no later than Friday, November 3, 1989. The appropriate form is available from the Registration Office, Suite C130 West Office Building, telephone 736-6155.

Petitions which demonstrate administrative default on the part of a University office or cover compassionate reasons are considered. The Registrar's decision is final.

Office of the Registrar  
September 28, 1989