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## People vulnerable to bad information about food

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Baloney detection kit | Psychology professor urges skepticism, but says human minds can be easily tricked

MEDICINE HAT, Alta. — A farmer at the Dec. 2-3 Farming Smarter conference wondered aloud about when the public, inundated with conflicting information about food, might simply begin to ignore it all.

Keynote speaker Michael Shermer, founding publisher of Skeptic magazine and executive director of the Skeptics Society, had no answer.

There may not be one.

However, Shermer did say people believe things, some of them odd, because of how the human brain is wired.

It's why some people can imagine there's an image of the Virgin Mary on a grilled cheese sandwich and why others think genetically modified food might kill them.

“The problem isn't that people believe weird things because they're uneducated or they're not smart. That's not the problem at all,” said Shermer.

“It has something to do with how our minds work.”

Two primary thinking patterns are at the core of human beliefs: believing a pattern is real when it's not, and not believing a pattern when it is real.

Is that infrequent rustling in the bushes a bear? Or can that rustling be ignored as random?

The human default is to believe patterns are real. So, people protect themselves in case there is a bear in the bushes. It costs little to believe it and the alternative could be dangerous.

This is essentially the precautionary principle at its simplest.

As well, Shermer said people tend to believe what they are told to expect.

“It’s easy to be taken down a path which you don’t want to go.”

Given these tendencies, Shermer said it’s not surprising that food myths gain traction.

Diet and the effects of specific foods are hard to study because of the variables, including people’s tendency to imagine things or forget what they ate or how much or even when.

As a result, scientific data is lacking.

Fad diets are suspect for that reason and because people tend to remember the things that reinforce an existing view or that bolster what they want to believe.

The paleo diet, which is designed to replicate the wild plant and animal diet of paleolithic man, is a case in point, said Shermer.

It has no scientific basis and breaks down when considering that people have been eating genetically modified food for 10,000 years — foods that have evolved through natural selection and development.

“Everybody was lactose intolerant 10,000 years ago,” said Shermer, criticizing the diet’s elimination of dairy products.

Man developed the needed enzymes to process lactose over time as animal agriculture developed.

Concern over GM food is likely related to the false belief that natural food is always better, said Shermer.

Every science fiction film has at its core the notion that science is taken too far, which he said is what people fear about GM food.

An anti-capitalist mentality also plays a role. Food was once the basis for communal sharing. The market elements that came later run contrary to this basis, causing distrust.

Science is the best tool for separating fact from fiction, said Shermer.

“Anecdotes are not data. They’re just stories.”

He urged his audience to employ skepticism, demand data when seeking proof and always employ a “baloney detection kit” when considering claims.

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