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The Centre for Leadership for Women focuses on the subject of Genetically Modified Foods (GM Foods). Dr Rosemary Stanton, well-known Australian Nutritionist explores various perspectives of this contentious development. An informed debate about the production of GM Foods, requires a consideration of what this means to all the stakeholders - farmers, researchers, retailers, investors, government and consumers. Stanton's discussion presents insights into key questions which she raises, challenging us to debate this new technology before rushing into accepting it.

Genetically Modified Foods By Dr Rosemary Stanton OAM

Throughout the world, there is a debate raging over genetically modified (GM) foods. Are they safe? Should they be labelled? How might they affect future health? What will they do to the environment? Are they necessary? Can Australia afford to miss out on the benefits of growing GM crops? Who benefits from these new technologies?

Reactions against GM foods range from the logical arguments of the Union of Concerned Scientists to protesters in space suits ripping up trial fields of GM crops in the United Kingdom. Some large food companies and major supermarket chains in the United Kingdom and Europe have declared they will not stock the foods, usually because they see the commercial advantages in taking such a stand. Many, including consumer groups in most countries of the world, have called for a moratorium on commercial growing of GM crops until their health, environmental and ethical effects have been fully investigated by independent researchers and appropriate committees.

On the other hand, companies marketing GM foods and some researchers react angrily to anyone who questions their wholehearted support of the technology. Researchers are often enthusiastic about potentially useful applications of the technology, and also see many job opportunities. Organisations representing large food companies are also in favour of GM foods, convinced that the public concern is fuelled by ignorance and scaremongering on the part of 'green' groups.

Where will it all lead, and what are the options?

Gene technology itself is not inherently bad and it undoubtedly has many potential uses. Medical applications of gene technology, for example, are vitally important and are well accepted because consumers see them as useful and their production and use is contained.

Theoretically, GM crops could offer better nutrition to people in countries where undernutrition is a major problem. The reality, however, is that GM crops are being grown in countries where there is more than enough food and are sold only to those who can pay for them. Many are being used for animal feeds - a

proven distortion of use of the world's resources and GM crops have not been cheaper than regular crops and have not given the increased yields promised. Over 80% of the world's farmers are subsistence farmers and for them, GM crops will lead to a continued and worsening indebtedness to large agribusinesses. Many consumers believe there has not been sufficient recognition of the potential ecological problems of GM crops. The ethical aspects of large companies owning the patents on seeds used for basic foodstuffs has also been largely ignored as companies rush to secure their markets ahead of their competitors. The influence agribusinesses exert on governments, the lack of consultation with the public, the unwillingness to label GM products, the attempts to marginalise those who enter the debate and the dismissal of valid concerns as scaremongering do not engender confidence in those promoting GM foods. Nor does the fact that those who stand to profit from the research are its funders.

There are many examples where embracing new technologies before all the evidence is to hand have proved disastrous. The problems of pesticides when used in combination, the land degradation resulting from overenthusiastic clearing, salinity from irrigation and mad cow disease from inappropriate animal feeds are a few examples. We already have evidence that some forms of GM technology could create future problems with weed control and disrupt ecological balance through their effect on beneficial insect populations, so you might assume we would accept the lessons of history and move slowly.

Even more importantly, we should be working out whether there are practical ways this technology could benefit those who need it most instead of increasing the coffers of those who want the right to own and patent genetic resources. The disparity between rich and poor throughout the world is likely to accelerate with ownership of GM food patents. Much more debate on this technology is needed before we rush into accepting it.