

PUBLIC PANIC OVER PESTICIDES?

*How golf course superintendents communicate
the safety of chemical treatments.*

by JOHN PALING, Ph.D.

EVERYONE concerned about the game of golf should be aware that, if there was an accident involving chemicals on any golf course in America, the safety practices of the whole industry could immediately be brought into question. Within a couple of days, it is likely that superintendents across the country would be getting calls from the press. Quite possibly, before you could stop and think, a reporter could put you on the spot by asking you to justify whether your activities are really safe for your members and the surrounding community. What questions might you expect and how could you answer them?

This project arose from my invitation to give a keynote address on risk communication at the 1996 USGA Green Section Education Conference held at the GCSAA meeting in Orlando. To prepare for this task, I felt that I could help my audience best by surveying how golf course superintendents might answer problem press inquiries. This is a brief report of what I learned and what the industry might benefit from considering.

First, it is important to note that by its nature, this was an informal, unscientific survey carried out by phone. Our participants knew this was only a survey, and we explained that all identities would remain confidential when we tabulated the results. Stating our purpose and receiving permission to proceed, we asked questions in a journalistic style by interacting to the answers given. The questions were changed slightly on occasion and the answers were tabulated by a multiple-choice questionnaire designed for this purpose. The plan was to phone at least two golf course superintendents from each state.



John Paling

The first lesson we learned was that superintendents work very hard on their courses and that it was nearly impossible to get them on the phone! The second lesson we learned was that if we left a message explaining our purpose, many did not phone back! Our conclusion, therefore, was that golf course superintendents may view an approaching journalist in the same way that a water hydrant views an approaching dog!

Those we did reach were patient and helpful. Furthermore, they revealed a genuine love of their work and a dedication to doing their best, whatever it took. A sense of real commitment and pride in their work came across strongly to us. However, it did not take long to find people who could have been manipulated into making embarrassing statements by the *real* press.

In summary, we phoned a total of 118 people but achieved only 23 complete interviews. Our results, while not conclusive, do give valuable insight into the mind-set of some members of the profession. Here are the questions we asked, the responses we obtained, and lessons we drew from the replies.

Question 1

We've found that some people living around your course are worried about all the pesticides you have to use to keep the greens in such good shape. Since they are all poisons and they must all finally get into the water table, how do you answer your neighbors who are concerned about the health effects on their kids?

Reassurance was invariably forthcoming in the answers, and they broke down along the following lines:

- "Reassuring evidence from research sponsored by the USGA" — 43%.
- "We follow what the EPA/chemical companies tell us is safe" — 30%.
- "We have to pass special training to make sure we do the job" — 30%.
- "We only spray in small quantities and under carefully controlled conditions" — 17%.
- "We are more exposed than the public and we wouldn't do that if we were in any doubt about the safety" — 13%.
- "We are always concerned about safety" — 30%.

The Paling Perspective

I strongly suggest that all golf course superintendents take this opportunity to carefully think through how they would answer the above question. If they are personally convinced that their treatments do not present a

serious risk to the safety of their community, how confident are they about the care taken by other members of the profession? Remember that if a superintendent has been using chemicals for a long period, it is not impossible that the very familiarity with the process might have made them blasé regarding the undoubted risks that do exist.

As well as the *content* of the question, it is wise to pay attention to some of the *strategies* used by the questioner. Beware of the common practice of interviewers who make an introductory statement and then go on to ask you a specific question. Often the preliminary statement contains an unfavorable implication that you are not questioned about. If you don't pick up on it, it can be accepted by listeners as being true.

For example, in our question it was implied that large quantities of poisons were used, but the question was not directed to that. In such instances, it is important not to let the bad implication pass uncorrected. One possible way of responding to this could be, "Just let me start by saying that your question implies we use large quantities, but that would be incorrect. We only spray small amounts and then only under carefully controlled conditions. But you are correct in saying that a few members of the public are concerned and I am happy to have the chance to address their worries." Then go with your message. Never miss an opportunity to convey your constant concern for safety.

Question 2A

Didn't the experts all say DDT was OK once? Why should we trust you now? (Asked of 10 respondents.)

- "We now have new products that break down very quickly" — 60%.
- "Yes, but now scientists know far more" — 30%.
- One truthful, but unexpected reply: "Yes, I suppose we could be wrong now!"

The Paling Perspective

Concede that they may have a point! Don't try to override real objections by pretending you know better and you (or your organization) could never be wrong. That attitude only leads to immediate skepticism and anything else you say could be discounted.

Question 2B

Why should we believe research sponsored by the USGA? That's like

the tobacco companies telling me smoking is OK! (Asked of 8 respondents.)


- "This is independent research done in universities and agricultural colleges; it can be checked by others" — 63%.
- "It is not just the USGA; it is also what EPA/chemical companies' safety tests show" — 25%.
- One unexpected reply: "Yep, you're right — it doesn't look good!"

The Paling Perspective

In all interviews, remember to take such follow-up questions in good spirit. Don't get stressed out or mad at the interviewer (or beat him with a

**UP TO YOUR
ARMPITS IN
ALLIGATORS?**

How to sort out what risks
are worth worrying about!



BY JOHN & SEAN PALING

Dr. Paling co-wrote a book in 1994 to offer a tool for reporting and discussing risks in our everyday lives.

pesticide drum)! These are basic questions that a reporter could put to you as he/she tries to reflect some of the attitudes that his readers or viewers may have. Both of the above replies are excellent, but more important, they gain impact by being completely truthful (as all your replies should be).

Question 3

Are you saying that your spraying is 100% safe?

- "Yes, I can assure you it is absolutely safe" — 35%.
- "No, nothing is totally risk free" — 48%.
- "Yes, when used as directed" — 17%.

The Paling Perspective

I strongly believe the first is both incorrect and, what's more important, can be most unhelpful to the golfing community. Using pesticides is **NOT 100% safe**, even when used according to the instructions. I suggest that many of the problems facing businesses in communicating risks have come from a fear of admitting that what they do does have some risk attached to it! In the anxiety over not being caught with legal or public relations consequences, businesses have moved onto thin ice by denying risks exist.

It is both truthful and helpful to agree that there are risks everywhere and that you are concerned and accept your responsibilities for those associated with your operation and **all of society's risks must be put into perspective**. Attention should be refocused on *relative risks*. Change the paradigm from declaring that what you do is 100% safe to saying, "Yes, it does represent a real but small risk. But when seen in relation to loads of other risks we are all at home with, the risks from our pesticide applications are effectively zero."

Don't let yourself be quoted as an expert on the risks involved. Understand that even though you may have been carrying out chemical treatments for many years, you are not an expert on the relative safety of chemicals.

To see how risks can be put into perspective for your golfers and community, see the article by Dr. Mike Kenna in the July/August 1995 *USGA Green Section Record*.

Question 4

We all know that some members of the public are hypersensitive to certain chemicals — whether it is bee stings or penicillin. Do you take full responsibility for any harm your pesticides may cause them?

- "Yes, I do take responsibility" — 17%.
- "No! No one can take responsibility for such hypersensitive people" — 39%.
- "Not me! It's the responsibility of the manufacturers and EPA" — 9%.
- "Compassion shown for the potential victims" — 30%.
- "We put signs up and notify the neighborhood — after that, it's their responsibility."
- "Yep, you've got me there! What should I answer?"
- "I'd ask my wife. She's a lawyer."



There's no substitute for developing lines of communication on the golf course.

The Paling Perspective

This is a tricky question. For your own information you should know that in practice, the professionals doing risk assessments add in safety factors at every step of the way. The final allowable doses in the regulations are actually *intended to be overprotective, even for hypersensitive people*. So it is very unlikely that, if you stick with the dose and procedures recommended, you or even the most hypersensitive person will be harmed. The best way to deal with tricky questions is to refer them to those trained to provide the information.

Conclusions

Even though this survey was unscientific in design, it did reveal some important points that lead me to the following strong recommendations.

Despite the dedication and outstanding professionalism of golf course superintendents, it is inevitable that an adversarial journalist could provoke embarrassing slips from a series of interviews. This would not be because the industry as a whole is irresponsible, but simply because of the large number of individuals involved with varying

levels of education and language skills. For this reason, I believe it would be good for the game if the GCSAA and the USGA found a way to remind superintendents on an annual basis of the paramount importance of keeping a constant focus on safety procedures in their workplace.

One way of achieving this would be to arrange for confidential spot checks to be done on two golf courses in each state and the aggregated results announced at the annual meeting of the GCSAA. The checks could include a site visit and surface water sampling along with an examination of the chemical treatment records. This not only would give a base line for benchmarking the ongoing performance of the industry, but it would be an annual reminder of the importance of continuing care in this aspect of the profession. The purpose of the evaluation would not be to try to catch people, but instead to monitor ongoing performance in the industry.

After role playing the spiky journalist posing impertinent questions, I changed roles and chatted with the superintendents about risk communication, including my recommendations

of annual spot checks. I found everyone was overwhelmingly in favor of the idea. As one man from Oregon observed, "I'm glad you're doing this survey. I'm always afraid that there are a few folks in this job who don't take their chemicals seriously enough! It only takes one person to screw up and it rubs off big-time on all the rest of us."

One final thought, as proposed by my office staff. What impressed us most during the survey was the care and dedication exhibited by the superintendents. In particular, newcomers to the practice of chemical applications were impressed by how decisions on how and when to spray were so carefully integrated with information about the weather and prevailing wind conditions. It occurred to us that lay people are not made aware of this aspect of the level of concern and commitment by the golf profession. Perhaps this message is worth communicating more forcefully!

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