

Boy with MCS testifies before Senate subcommittee

11-year-old Kevin Ryan testified in 1990 before a U.S. Senate subcommittee that pesticides made him sick.

Keywords: MCS, chemical sensitivity, children, pesticides, lawn care

Testimony for Oversight Committee hearing on pesticide laws

“I’d like you to know that I’m an 11-year-old boy who gets sick when exposed to lawn and tree spray chemicals. Some of my symptoms from pesticides are as follows: numbing and tingling of arms and legs, muscle and joint achiness, chest pressure, respiratory problems, nausea, severe stomach pain, diarrhea, brain symptoms, loss of memory, lack of concentration, irritability, depression, and fatigue. I can’t think or remember anything. I get angry for no reason. What are these chemicals doing to the other kids if this is what is happening to me?”

There are many things I cannot do that a normal 11-year-old can do. I can’t even play in my own yard because my neighbors spray their lawns and trees. I feel like a prisoner in my home during the summer months when all of the other kids are outside playing, and even staying inside doesn’t do enough good because the spray seeps through the house, especially on windy days. I can’t go into any public building or attend any public school in Illinois because all are sprayed with similar applications. I can’t go to any parks in my community or surrounding communities because they’re all sprayed, and being on a baseball team is a dream I have given up on because all of the ball fields are treated. The select choir that I’m a member of performs often in sprayed buildings and I can’t participate. I have a special interest and talent in piano, but I can’t go to music contests or recitals for the same reason. There are days that I can’t even play the piano at all because my fingers are too numb and stiff from chemical exposures.

My doctor told me I have to be careful about any further exposures to these pesticides to prevent more damage to my central nervous system – damage resulting from repeated exposures as an infant to our next-door neighbor’s lawn treatment. Fortunately, my parents have found a private school for intellectually gifted and artistically talented children that does not use pesticides on the grounds or inside the building. However, in the spring and the fall, I still can’t go to my school because of the surrounding neighbors that spray their lawns. As a matter of fact, I can’t even live in my home or this state when the lawn care season starts. During the months of March-June and August-October, my mother, brother and I must vacate Illinois and go west to the high elevations in Colorado where the air is

clean. I have to leave my home, my friends, my school, and my father (since his job is in Chicago) just because the people in my town don't want any stupid weeds in their lawns and the government allows them to purchase these chemicals. It is very hard for me to leave my friends and school, because I have to start over again at a different school, especially difficult at the end of the third quarter.

Please, senators, do something about these pesticides! They are robbing me of my childhood. I am so angry that my country has let me down: by allowing these chemicals to be put on the market without any testing and to be applied by any untrained person who knows nothing about the danger these chemicals cause. I am learning in social studies about the inalienable rights that our founding fathers guaranteed in the Declaration of Independence – life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; but I don't have these rights. I don't even have the right to be healthy. God has blessed me with many intellectual gifts and artistic talents (I work 2-4 grade levels above my chronological age); but as long as these pesticides are used, my future in this country is hopeless. I fear the same fate for my little four-year-old brother, who is already showing symptoms, and for the other kids in this country. I don't want to see what has happened to me happen to them.”

Notes

Kevin Ryan testified on March 28, 1990. He wrote the testimony himself. As he walked back from the podium, he passed the next speaker, who was a representative of a national lawn-care company. This person's clothing was so toxic that Kevin got sick from it and had to be led out of the room and put on oxygen.

The senators apparently did nothing to restrict this frivolous use of pesticides.

The Ryan family lived in middle-class Arlington Heights, a suburb on the north side of Chicago. They begged their neighbors to stop spraying their yards. Some complied, some responded that it was a ridiculous request, and refused.

A next-door neighbor told a journalist that spraying was necessary to keep up her property value and suggested the Ryan family should not have moved to the area.

By next year, the family had moved to rural McHenry County, northwest of Chicago.

The family sued ChemLawn, the largest lawn-care company at the time. The company has since changed its name to TruGreen.

We have not been able to find anything more recent about Kevin Ryan.

This may be due to the lawsuit. It might have been settled out of court, with a gag rule to be quiet about Kevin's illness. Companies prefer such arrangements to avoid bad publicity and setting legal precedents that could be used against them in similar lawsuits. Plaintiffs often accept, as the alternative is a protracted and very costly legal battle, as such companies will fight as hard as possible to exhaust the finances of the plaintiff.

Sources

A boy's testimony, *The Human Ecologist*, Fall 1990.

Lush lawns are a toxic terror for boy, Jessica Seigel, *Chicago Tribune*, March 27, 1990.

Lawn-care lawsuit restored, William Grady, *Chicago Tribune*, June 24, 1991.

More information

More historic MCS stories on www.eiwellspring.org/history.html