

Postscript

The only winner in the current stalemate over genetically modified foods is the protest industry, particularly self-designated “green” groups that call for public debate but already have their minds closed to the science. We are just beginning to exploit the potential of genetic technology. There is the promise of lifesaving drugs tailored to our individual genetics, the eventual disappearance of congenital diseases, and the remarkable manipulation of cells to regrow bones and damaged organs, including our hearts and brains. However, these scientific advances are years, if not decades, in the future. Only in agriculture is the promise of biotechnology actually being realized. Let’s hope that reasoned discourse and a careful balancing of risk against lost opportunity can help restore public confidence so vital research can continue.

We need to go beyond the precautionary principle and its obsession with “worst case” risks to a “risk-risk” model that also takes into account the potential benefits to change, not just potential dire consequences. While the precautionary principle states that the overriding goal of public policy should be guided by the ultraconservative drive to eliminate risk, a risk-risk approach would evaluate a situation based on the trade-offs that inevitably occur when reasonable risks are avoided at all cost. GM technological innovations should be evaluated not just on the basis of the farfetched dangers they potentially pose, but on the often-horrific, day-to-day harm that not risking innovation imposes on the most vulnerable members of society. How many children in the developing world have to die before we can risk moving forward with this technology?