

Toxic colonialism

The new-found enthusiasm for using DDT against malarial mosquitoes (6 October, p 58) overlooks some crucial details. While the decision was made in the comfortable offices of the World Health Organization in Geneva, there will be no spraying of Swiss bedroom walls. DDT has been banned in Switzerland for more than 35 years, and for good reasons.

The bedroom walls that the WHO has in mind for DDT spraying are those of the poorest Africans. These are people with little money, literacy, information or power, and therefore unpromising candidates as a source of profit for pharmaceutical companies.

It is an unfortunate irony that this toxicological colonialism comes on the centenary of Rachel Carson's birth. The enthusiasm for this poison following the second world war has left us with a personal DDT load. Over the past half century, none of the problems of DDT has been resolved. It remains a broad-spectrum poison, persistent and bio-accumulative - and it is still cheap to manufacture and highly profitable.

DDT treatment of a child's bedroom wall is effective for six months, but the toxic legacy in soil, groundwater, food, homes - and the child - lasts a lifetime. DDT is a cheap-and-dirty option that would never fly in Europe or the US, but is being foisted upon the unsuspecting, far-away poor.

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