

CMAJ: Heart and Soul  
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June Irwin: Profile of a sheep farmer

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Dr. June Irwin has whittled her routine down to the basics of life. The basics mean being the sole physician in a busy dermatology practice, while tending to the daily needs of over 100 chickens, 29 sheep and 25 geese on her farm. When she's not examining rashes or keeping coyotes out of the henhouse, Dr. Irwin focuses on her other preoccupation – documenting the effects of pesticide exposure on health. “That’s what’s good about living on a farm,” she says while leaning on her shepherd’s crook. “You learn to follow the rules of nature.”

Following the rules of nature is good for stress relief, says Irwin, and is also the root of her environmental activism. Her 70 acre farm is located in Hudson, a community of 3000 people about 60 km. west of Montreal. There Irwin’s noisy barnyard is surrounded by picturesque country homes, hobby farms and a golf course, all framed to advantage by emerald lawns. But when Irwin thinks about perfect grass, instead of seeing green she sees red. “Anyone could take a truck and spray these toxic chemicals, and there’s nothing to prevent them,” she said in an interview among her sheep. Irwin keeps close tabs on studies in the medical literature that link lawn care chemicals -- commonly available on store shelves in spring and summer -- with leukemia and non-Hodgkins lymphoma. She then publicizes the information, in letters, speeches and petitions to make her point. “When it comes to pesticide use in Canada, we are a human experiment without records being kept.”

Irwin first made the connection between lawn products containing pesticides and some of the skin and gastrointestinal disorders she was seeing in her practice in 1986. It was around that time that she began to take blood samples and fat biopsies of patients with rashes and fever who lived in agricultural areas, or who had been exposed to lawn and extermination products. Often the lab results showed a high concentration of 2, 4-D, a herbicide associated with lymphoma and the main ingredient in commonly available weed killers. Or, there were residues of organic solvents like chlordane or lindane, substances related to DDT that are additives to pesticides, making them easier to spray or more effective pesticides. Since these discoveries

Irwin has mounted a nonstop campaign of letter-writing to newspapers, municipalities and government ministries, drawing attention to what she considers a grave health risk and a dangerous “free-for-all” when it comes to pesticide use. Her efforts resulted in a 1991 bylaw banning residential pesticides in Hudson, the first such ruling in Quebec. She succeeded even though the neighbouring suburbs on the West Island of Montreal had previously used more lawn chemicals than any other part of the country. Since the bylaw in Hudson many of these communities have followed suit, severely limiting or banning pesticide use outright.

June Irwin’s farm is reached by driving to one end of Hudson’s main road. She instructs visitors to look for an orange string tied around her mailbox, because her address isn’t on it. “I have certain priorities in my life, and they’re not a new mailbox,” she says. “Anyway, I rarely have visitors. I don’t have time.” Given that Irwin devotes “thousands of hours” to environmental advocacy, this comes as no surprise. And Irwin pays for American lab reports herself, assuming that \$200 US is too much for most patients to absorb. “If we have no records of these pesticides, there’s no culpability,” she explains. Ultimately, Irwin would like to see environmental health centres established in Canada where patients who have been exposed to environmental contaminants can be diagnosed and detoxified.

But the basics of life don’t mean all work and no play. Dr. Irwin likes to keep her hens happy with freshly cut dandelion greens and bits of pumpkin. She routinely takes her sheep (who have shaggy dreadlocks because shearing would be a trauma) for a walk over the hill to Finnegan’s flea market. That’s where Irwin barter farm produce for antiques to furnish her medical office. “Patients call to see if I’m there, and then just come over. I operate in a free spirit. They learn from watching others to just put their card down on the desk and wait.”

That’s because Irwin works without a receptionist so that she can devote more resources to environmental causes. “I admire her for being such a maverick,” says patient Stephanie Whittaker. Also a vocal opponent of pesticide use, Whittaker once called an exterminator to deal with carpenter ants in her walls. Then she told all to her doctor. “I confessed to her as if she were a priest, and she responded ‘You, of all people!’” Although Whittaker felt suitably ashamed, she was also appreciative. “The world does not have enough passionate people like her.”

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Medical Post, Actualite Medicale and other clippings from Dr. Irwin's files  
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