MISERY IS NOT A HEALTH FOOD

BY PATRICIA DENYS AND MARY HOLMES

We recently spoke to Karen Davis, PhD, founder and president of United Poultry Concerns, about wet markets, animal agriculture, and other topics of concern. If you are unfamiliar with UPC, it was founded in 1990 by Davis. According to its website, “United Poultry Concerns is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the compassionate and respectful treatment of chickens, turkeys, ducks and other domestic fowl. We hold that the treatment of these birds in the areas of food production, science, education, entertainment, and humane companionship situations has a significant effect upon human, animal, and environmental welfare.”

First, we asked Davis how she responds to those who state they eat chicken, not beef, because it’s the healthier alternative. She put that misnomer to rest immediately; it’s all propaganda. “The public has had this idea that eating poultry is more wholesome than eating red meat. Well, actually, for a long time that eating poultry is more wholesome has been nothing more than a piece of propaganda that has no validity in real life.”

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, many chickens, in particular, have lost their lives virtually overnight. She discussed this bluntly, “We’ve heard recently how 2 million chickens were killed over a 24- to 48-hour period, most likely it seems from what we’ve gleaned from the news coverage, by having the ventilation shut off in the houses, and having the temperatures turned up so that the birds actually baked to death in the houses, and die a very slow death of overheating and suffocation. This is the cheapest and easiest way apparently, to destroy large numbers of birds, roughly two million all at the same time, over a 24- to 48-hour period. Not all of those birds among those millions die at exactly the same time. Millions of birds have been bulldozed in Georgia, because of the recent tornado in April, and that’s a rather commonplace practice too in the poultry industry, just bulldozing unwanted birds. We also have the birds in Virginia and Maryland, who have been subjected to what the industry calls depopulation, mass depopulation. Some birds have succumbed because of ventilation shutdowns, some by carbon dioxide poisoning, and some by the use of water-based foam, which causes hypoxia.

We’re currently in a pandemic that’s unprecedented in its scale, and this is a call for compassion, and we’re finding that the industry is not acting with compassion. We have a group of people who are raising chickens in cages that have mounds of excrement right below the cages, or, if they’re in a so-called cage-free facility, a cage-free facility is still filled with pathogens, that is, disease-causing organisms, many of which can be passed on from the birds to human beings, including strains of salmonella and campylobacter, listeria, certain types of fungi, and so on. When you have animals being forced to live in filthy conditions for their entire lives, and then they go to a slaughterhouse, which is just nothing but blood, filth, terror, violence, and everything else, you have a product that the industry soaks in chlorine in order to remove at least some of those microorganisms that, notwithstanding, still are on the skin of the birds and it can cause people who consume them to become sick and, in some cases, even die.”

According to Davis, the CDC, (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) has estimated that every year in the United States alone, there are up to about 9,000 deaths as a result of food-borne poisoning. In addition, the US Department of Agriculture points out, “The foods most likely to carry pathogens are high protein, non-acid foods such as meat, poultry, seafood, dairy products, and eggs.”

Lastly, she cites physician Dr. Michael Greger, who has stated that poultry products are the main source of food-borne diseases in people.

Davis further commented, “So you clearly have a product from animals who are raised in filth, who not only enter the slaughterhouses, but leave the slaughterhouses covered in disease-causing organisms. These pathogens cause thousands and thousands of deaths each year, and cause millions of people, anywhere from six and a half million to fifty-five million people in the United States alone to develop food-borne illnesses, that is, diarrheas, and cramps, all kinds of miserable intestinal infections. Even when people get better it doesn’t necessarily mean that the microbes that caused the infections leave their bodies, because a lot of times these microbes stick around, and can enter their joints in later life to cause arthritis and other kinds of illnesses. In short, the idea that chicken is a health food compared to beef is really just a piece of propaganda that has no validity in real life.”

Karen Davis, PhD and rescued hen blinded by ammonia fumes in a Tyson facility in Maryland. Photo © Bruce Andrew Peters

PHOTOGRAPHS USED BY KIND PERMISSION OF UNITED POULTRY CONCERNS

©Susan Rayfield

TOP: Eggs layers know as battery hens. Battery cages hold 7-10 hens, in a 6.7-8.6 square inch space. Esbenshade Farms, Mount Joy, PA ©Zoe Weil

MIDDLE: Chicks bred to grow fast for slaughter at six weeks of age. Perdue Farms, DE ©David Harp

BOTTOM: Former battery hens enjoying naturally roosting at UPC. ©Susan Rayfield
of industrialization began, most people in the West stopped being farmers themselves, moved to the cities, and began going to so-called modern grocery stores. Davis added, “Grocery stores, food stores, instituted practices and utilized chemicals to prevent the odor of dead flesh from being noticeable, and so we have what appears, superficially, to be a very sanitized experience with the dead animals, who are usually in a condition of pieces. In the case of chickens and turkeys, of course, you have a whole body but the heads are removed, and usually the legs are removed, too, except for the thighs.”

Some animal rights activists have been hopeful that maybe the pandemic will serve as a wake-up call to agribusiness and consumers alike, and business will change for the better. Davis pulled no punches. “Of course I don’t know the answer to that question but my assumption is once this whole coronavirus epidemic, or pandemic, has pretty much passed, people will tend to just go back. Agribusiness is only going to respond to one thing, and that is to their profit margins. If people are purchasing the same amount of poultry, for example, or beef, or bacon, pork, etc., they don’t have any incentive at all to change any of their practices. So the question having to do with agribusiness is a question about whether they’re going to see a drop-off in consumption, one of the things that appears to be the case during this coronavirus pandemic is that, in the United States, for example, people are buying up all the meat they can. They’re even buying more live chickens so they can slaughter them themselves, or have their heads removed, and usually the legs are removed, too, except for the thighs.”

There is still some hopeful news. She commented on the growing interest in plant-based, animal-free meat-like, and dairy-like products. More people have been purchasing these, and if that trend continues, we should see increased mass production of these products. Clearly, this is a lengthy process, but this is the only way to get away from “business as usual.”

Asked if she had anything further to share with our readers, she concluded, “I would just say that we’re in a situation right now where we are not sure where the industry is going to go, and where consumer buying habits and consumption habits are going to go, but as animal advocates, it is our job to do everything we can to grow the vegan economy and to encourage people to understand that these animal products that they may like so well, or are so familiar with, are not ultimately making them healthy, but are actually subjecting them to food borne illnesses. Again, if they have respiratory infections they’re going to be susceptible to all these flu viruses, and the coronavirus, just as these chickens are so sick and so easily infected by a whole range of flu viruses alone. We also encourage people to understand that eating the suffering of other creatures is not really healthy. We have a saying that, ‘Misery is not a health food.’ While we may not be able to trace exactly the effects of eating misery on consumers, we believe it is a factor in how people feel and how people behave. We want people to understand that, just as misery may be invisible to them when they look at a piece of dead chicken, or dead cow, or pig; just as the disease organisms are invisible, so is the suffering and the misery embedded in those products that once belonged to a living being with feelings, and eyes, and a heart beating. And we want people to care about the animals and to not want to hurt them anymore, which we certainly have no right to do, and don’t need to do.”

Website: https://www.upc-online.org/