BY PATRICIA DENYS AND MARY HOLMES

Photos by United Poultry Concerns.

MISERY IS NOT A HEALTH FOOD

We recently spoke to Karen Davis, PhD, founder and president of United Poultry Concerns, about wet markets, COVID-19, changes she foresees in 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. We seek to make the public aware of the ways in which poultry are used, and to promote the benefits of a vegan diet and lifestyle." Their sanctuary is located in Machipongo, VA, on the state's Eastern Shore.

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 misinformation to rest immediately; it’s all propaganda. "The public has had this idea for a long time that eating poultry is more healthful than eating red meat. Well, actually, for a long time that eating poultry is more propaganda. “The public has had this idea that chicken is a health food compared to beef is really just 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 is 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.
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Slaughterhouse workers who have the virus have reduced the available workforce, so slaughterhouse production went down. “The slaughterhouse workers are very susceptible to infection, and this has been reported by the mainstream news media because in order to do the kind of work they do on the assembly lines they have to be together in close proximity and they can’t really spread out six feet apart. So many of these workers for Smithfield and Tyson and other poultry plants, Allen Poultry on the Eastern Shore of Delaware, have gotten sick with the coronavirus and I believe some have died, but the Trump Administration has ordered that these slaughter plants be kept going regardless of the effect on the workers, so the workers are living and working in the most deplorably filthy, blood-soaked, pathogen-ridden environments. Adding those things to the fact that the air in these places is terrible, and many workers already have respiratory infections that they suffer from as a result of that type of work, and that makes them even more susceptible to contracting the COVID-19 in the slaughter plants. The workers are very susceptible and they have to make a choice between going to work and getting a paycheck, and getting sick and possibly dying, or getting sick and passing on their coronavirus illness to members of their family, or other people, even outside the slaughter plants, as well as inside.”

We talked about the so-called ‘wet markets’ and their contribution to the spread of the disease. Davis is harsh in her evaluation of them. “I’ve written pretty extensively about them, starting in January. The wet markets epitomize the most filthy, cruel places on earth. Animals are brought in, wild animals, domesticated animals, we’re talking about every type of animal that can be snatched from the wild or from you name it, and are eaten by the patrons of wet markets, or so called live animal markets. … There are these, these wet markets have existed in Asian countries for apparently at least centuries. All these different animals are all mixed in together, these wild animals, whether they’re bats, scorpions, tigers, wolves, baboons and everything, along with birds who are considered domesticated, that is, chickens and turkeys, and geese and ducks. Then there are all the aquatic animals, fish, also amphibians. They’re all just mixed together and these wet markets tend to include both the dead animals and the live animals, which is true in the markets in the United States, and elsewhere where they exist. These places are just completely cruel, they’re completely filthy, and the patrons don’t seem to care. We did a video of a live poultry market back in 1993, which is on our website, and you can just see how the patrons who come into this filthy, horrible, ugly place seem perfectly satisfied with the odors of these – you go into a live poultry market, or live animal market in general, the odors alone are just absolutely horrific. But again, people who are used to that don’t seem to mind it.” After the age 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 eggs, and not have to rely on what is provided in their retail supermarkets. It’s very hard to predict, but, my guess would be that pretty much business as usual has been going on, and we’ll simply continue when COVID-19 is largely passed, whenever that may be.”

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/