

Joanna Pickford's PFAS Story

I still, if people ask about it, after over 2 years tear up and find it hard to speak. Every day little things pop into my head to remind me.

I am a single parent, When I arrived in Australia, I worked hard to save enough to buy this little house for myself and my daughter. I was proud of my achievement. My daughter and myself went without for many years so we could pay the loan off. I used to say to my daughter, "when I own this house it will be your insurance policy in the event of any catastrophe." I loved this place, it was my refuge and my solace. I loved my garden and birds and insects and frogs. I used to say, "the land must be good because I have frogs." Although not very good at gardening I would try and grow our vegetables. I enjoyed the successes and kept retrying various methods to get better.

For as long as I can remember I have been and environmentalist. I never use harsh chemicals, I used to make my own laundry liquid before you could purchase environmentally friendly products. I had a book called the green cleaner from 1990 and I used to and still do make my own cleaning products. I allow the spider webs to stay. I saved up and had the house renovated inside to make it workable and comfortable and easy to maintain. It was to be my last home a place to stay till the end. It was my haven.

When I discovered my land and my beautiful chickens were contaminated it was like being punched in the guts at full force. I was devastated I cried a lot. I became angry and still I feel a low-level anger all the time and that's not good.

Here are some of the ways I am affected daily by the contamination that was caused by defence in the words of the EPA "defence is the polluter."

Throwing away eggs was an impossible task. I worried that for years I had been contaminating my family and friends particularly my grandchildren who loves boiled eggs laid by Foxy or Goosie or Dotti. My grandsons stopped running out to collect the eggs when they came, they lost that joy, the youngest said "Nana they are no good to eat any more." Dust because from the drought became a worry. Mowing and sweeping is a very dusty activity. Then I remember. I made a digging patch down near the chook run for my grandchildren when they stayed. We dug the dirt and dust made raceways for cars and sometimes we made mud and mud pies. Sometimes we rolled in the wet muddy grass and got filthy and took photos for Mummy. Then we had a hot bath and got all clean. I agonise now as to whether my youngest grandsons' propensity to every little bug going around and random skin conditions could be triggered could be cause by me allowing these fun activities in contaminated soil. They played in the mud from babies because I am an early childhood teacher and understand what is good for children, but it turns out I was wrong, and it was not good for them.

I suddenly could not eat my own produce any more not just the eggs, but the fruit, vegetables and herbs. All defence would say is that tests elsewhere showed that fruit and vegetables were unlikely to be contaminated. How can an individual assess "unlikely"? This adds a level of anxiety, the not knowing. People who knew about the contamination were

not keen to eat any of my produce. Perception is a very powerful agent. I couldn't blame them. The level of miss information flowing around the place added to the confusion. Still Defence staunchly refused to test any of our home grown produce to alleviate any of our concerns. Everyone is then left hanging and wondering and worrying, not knowing. Do we eat or not eat? I decided not to.

When gardening I sometimes am surprised about the things I suddenly think. For example, here in the Hawkesbury we have fairly recently given green bins which I fill up easily because I have so many trees and weeds and I wonder am I inadvertently contaminating someone else's garden because this waste is used for mulch. What about compost. I compost all the sawdust from the chicken run. I certainly don't put it in my new vegetable beds because I don't want to contaminate what I eat. But am I re contaminating my garden if I put it on the flower beds?

When I dig up a cutworm, I can no longer feed it to my chickens because it will be contaminated. You might not know this, but chickens are highly social and make beautiful clucking and crooning noises when they find a treat, they call to the others to come and share. I fed them cut worms out of my hand they would be so excited and hang round close to where I was digging so I could show them the treat. I miss so much not being able to have them free range my garden. They would come and look for me at 4.30 every day to remind me that they would be going to roost soon, and would I please give them their night-time treat? As someone who now lives alone my chickens were friends who talked to me and kept me company whilst I was gardening.

How contaminated are we is a question I ask myself? Defence staunchly refuses us blood tests because you say that there is nothing we can do with the information. But there is a lot an individual can do. If they know the contamination in their blood was minimal, they could stop worrying. If it is higher, they could start looking at lifestyle and reduce as best as possible contact with the PFAS chemicals the world. I strongly believe that knowing the PFAS level in me and my families blood would help me stop worrying. If I feel like this imaging how others feel. Defence is also not gathering the information needed to assess how people across the spectrum are affected. This is bad for science. It is bad science.

I could go on about all the little things like what if I need to sell, do I have to tell the people looking at the house its contaminated? Will it affect the price? There are so many facets to this problem. I think that bureaucrats just don't get it. I undertook the makeover to minimise PFAS in my garden using money from my superannuation. I needed to undertake this project for my mental well-being. Now I'm in a waiting game to see if Defence will compensate me. Defence has access to legal advice. I do not. I am not holding my breath.