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It is extremely disconcerting to stand here discussing the hazards of child farm labor in the United States today. That the very existence of child labor is not being debated should give us pause, living as we do in the richest country in the world. Children as young as 12 can be hired to perform the most onerous and dangerous work in the country, often for meager, below-minimum wage pay. More children die or are injured on the farm than in almost any other industry in which they work. The Department of Labor has, after more than a decade, belatedly proposed updates to current rules to better protect child farmworkers from some life-threatening hazards. Yet, even these mild protections are being relentlessly attacked by those who claim to speak for the traditional family farm, but who are too often, in reality, protecting the interests of big agribusiness over those of the children they employ. While this is undoubtedly a moral question, there is also a critical medical dimension to the issue, which I’ll briefly discuss here.

From a medical perspective, we know that children are more vulnerable than adults to the myriad hazards encountered on a farm. A child’s mental capacity and judgment is not as fully developed as it is in an adult. For this reason, we do not allow children to drive before 16 years of age, yet we allow them to operate tractors on public and private roads. By that same token, child labor was long ago abolished in factories, yet we continue to allow children to operate similar heavy machinery on what we call farms today.

As doctors well know, children are not little adults. Their bodies are structured fundamentally differently, beyond smaller size, leaving them uniquely vulnerable to a number of different hazards, many of which go unnoticed by the employer, the child, and parent alike.

One of the most alarming is nicotine poisoning, or green tobacco sickness, which afflicts up to one-fourth of all tobacco farmworkers. It is unknown how many children work on tobacco farms in the U.S., one of the leading tobacco producing countries in the world. Children handling tobacco leaves absorb nicotine on the leaves through their skin. Nicotine is a highly addictive substance and workers who pick tobacco leaves can absorb in a typical day as much nicotine as that found in 12 cigarettes. Over many
years, children may become dependent on nicotine, and can suffer from acute nicotine poisoning, which leads to vomiting, trouble breathing, and heart disturbances that can be fatal.

Case after case of acute nicotine poisoning in child farmworkers has been documented, with many requiring hospitalization for life-threatening symptoms. Unlike other agricultural hazards, it is the tobacco plant itself, not chemicals such as pesticides, that is the cause of this illness. Therefore only a complete prohibition of child farm work on tobacco farms will prevent further needless injury.

Another, far more widespread danger raised by the Department of Labor in its call for comments is heat stress, responsible for the deaths of over 500 U.S. workers over the past two decades. Children toil in unimaginably hot conditions all across the country picking the fruits and vegetables that populate our supermarket shelves. Hundreds of thousands of children come home from school every day (those that do go to school at all) only to face several hours of more work under the hot sun.

Heat stress is a completely preventable hazard that requires minimal intervention. A few glasses of water and adequate rest breaks every hour are often all that is needed to prevent serious injury or death from heat exposure. However, these necessities are luxuries for child farmworkers, as they are not required to be provided by those who employ children on the farms. In the absence of such requirements, over the past two decades, at least 1,600 teenage workers, including some under the age of 16, have suffered serious injury, leading to a sick day or hospital admission, from extreme heat exposure. Pervasive under-reporting of injuries means the true number, especially for those under 16 years of age, is much higher.

Despite the fact that children are more vulnerable than adult workers to these and other dangers, they are granted fewer, not more, protections on the job. And contrary to vacuous assertions emanating from certain quarters, even these minimal protections, like the Department of Labor’s long-overdue proposed rules, do not apply to family farms.

Indeed, parents of children who work on traditional family farms would be shocked were they to witness the conditions under which hired child laborers are forced to work. Few parents would have their own children perform back-breaking work for hours on end on a hot summer day, without so much as a few minutes rest or a glass of water, or allow their children to inhale the equivalent of 12 cigarettes a day while picking tobacco leaves. And no parent would ever want to see their child’s life put at-risk on a daily basis, as are the lives of thousands of children who work with dangerous machinery.
Many hired child farmworkers are also different from their family farm counterparts in a more fundamental way. They are forced to work because they were unlucky enough to be born into a family that required their labor to make ends meet. Through no fault of their own, they are required to work in one of the most dangerous occupations in the country, facing hazards workers in other industries do not.

Again, this issue is, at its core, a moral one. Over seventy years ago, we decided as a country that exploiting children for their labor was wrong so we largely prohibited the practice in all industries except agriculture. We strongly believe that the U.S. must finally close the chapter on child labor and extend the prohibition to farm work. Only a total ban on child labor will guarantee that no more children die or are seriously injured on the farm. But if the regressive practice is to be continued, only the safest tasks should be allowed. This should go without saying when discussing the nation’s children, yet somehow we still debate the issue today.