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CONFERENCE ON NUTRITION AND THE AMERICAN FOOD SYSTEM

By Judy Lea Jones

Nutrition has become one of the major public policy issues of our time. The second annual Conference on Nutrition and the American Food System in June brought together representatives from consumer organizations, government, and the food industry as well as professional, scientific, and academic institutions to discuss many questions and issues raised in the debate over national dietary goals and strategies. The Community Nutrition Institute, a public interest group, sponsored the conference in cooperation with the Food Marketing Institute and Family Circle Magazine.

Changing Food Consumption Patterns and Health Concerns

FDA Commissioner Donald Kennedy told the conference that we don't have an adequate handle on the nutritional impact of eating more processed foods. Nutritionists, Kennedy said, don't know the health effects of lifetime deficits of trace elements such as molybdenum, manganese, chromium, selenium, and silicon. Before the American diet was made up of so much processed food, he continued, this ignorance made little difference. People ate such a variety of fresh foods that it could be safely assumed they were ingesting sufficient amounts of trace elements.

The 'ultimate' in processed foods was described by Tracey Westen of FTC's Bureau of Consumer Protection. Westen revealed that manufactured potato chips which come in a can have taste on only one side. He explained that processing removes all the potato chip flavor, so the

manufacturer has to re-inject potato chip taste by using chemical additives. Cost/benefit experts have determined that it is cheaper to put the artificial flavor only on the bottom of the chip and not waste it on the top where it wouldn't contact the tongue.

For many years it was an article of faith among the general public that Americans were the best fed people in the world. Now it seems that our relative affluence, along with an increasingly complex food manufacturing and marketing process, is itself generating some serious health problems nationwide, Westen said.

The Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs last year reported that overconsumption of fats, cholesterol, sugar, salt, and alcohol has been linked to 6 of the 10 leading causes of death in the United States. Obesity is now a major nutrition health problem; about one-third of the population is overweight to a degree which may diminish life expectancy.

A Nutritionally Educated Public—Whose Responsibility?

As a Nation we have come to believe that medicine and medical technology can solve our major health problems. Treatment, not prevention, has been the order of the day. There exists a curious psychology that it is possible to avoid responsibility for our own health by purchasing better health from a physician. But more and more government policymakers and leaders in the health professions are coming to believe that preventive aspects of medicine, including nutrition, in the long run will prove to be the

cheapest, most desirable route to good health, maximum productivity, and lowered medical and health costs for the Nation.

Carol Tucker Foreman, Assistant Secretary of Agriculture for Food and Consumer Services, indicated that she believes there is a role for government to play in conveying the current state of knowledge about the potential benefits of modifying dietary habits and in assisting the public in making prudent food choices. Debating some critics who question the advisability of making dietary recommendations until all the answers are in, Foreman argued that absolute certainty is always hard to come by.

To promote the right food choices for better health, the public and government alike should press for better food labels (including percentage ingredient labeling) and more responsible and informative advertising.

Advertising-Labeling Miseducation—Proposed Regulatory Action

Marsha Cohen, Hastings College of Law, University of California, defined the food label as the sum of all communications, including promotional and advertising material, purposefully made about the contents and value of the product. In theory, sellers would be expected to provide food labels which respond directly to the needs and interests of buyers for whom that information is critical in decisionmaking in the marketplace. However, nutrition labeling today frequently fails to provide adequate information in usable form, while extraneous and

distracting information is commonplace, said Cohen. Partly in response to perceived deficiencies in the present system, government may increasingly exert an influence in food labeling.

In discussing advertising, FDA's Tracey Westen offered Dr. Jean Mayer's rough rule of thumb: 'the nutritional value of a food varies inversely with the amount spent to advertise it.' There is little advertising of fresh fruits and vegetables, he said. And there is no monetary reward for promoting the idea that consumers ought to eat less. The marketplace of commercial ideas seems to be incapable of transmitting any message other than 'buy more,' 'eat more,' or as FTC Chairman Michael Pertschuk put it, 'Consumer, stuff thyself.' Advertising's influence on children's nutritional habits was also discussed. The major theme in children's advertising is sweetness. It has been estimated that children see about 7,000 ads for sugar every year. Such an intensive selling effort during the formative years may be contributing to the development of lifelong nutrition habits and attitudes. The child who is sold on sweetness as a positive food attribute may join the ranks of overweight adults in the future.

With the upsurge of consumer interest in nutrition there has been a redirection of some advertising and promotion labeling, but those messages, said Marsha Cohen, provide only simplistic and fundamentally misleading information. The concept "natural equals nutritious" is being used to promote products which, though containing no artificial

preservatives, are a nutritional disaster in terms of fats, sugars, salt, and calories. The predominant message concerning vitamins and minerals is that if you ingest lots of them nutrition need not be a worry.

What is not said is that food fortification almost always adds only a small number of inexpensive vitamins and minerals (and those for which there are RDA's); that a balanced diet supplies these and many other crucial micronutrients anyway; that vitamin and mineral content alone is not a particularly useful gauge in food selection; or that if people want to assure vitamin and mineral intake in themselves or their children, a generic brand multiple vitamin and mineral tablet is far less expensive and less destructive to overall eating habits.

The food marketer's right to advertise is not, Cohen said, being seriously considered for extinction. But that right does not extend to advertising that is false or misleading, which by law means it cannot have even the capacity to deceive. If the absence of information about nutritional content of foods may deceive consumers, then that omission must be cured by a fuller presentation of the facts.

The recently initiated children's advertising rulemaking may start the ball rolling, Westen noted. The main thrust of the proceeding will be an examination of the possible deceptiveness of advertising sugar to children who are too young to evaluate the long-term health risks associated with its use, as well as the alleged unfairness of directing any advertising to children too

young to understand that commercials are designed to sell.

A second approach under consideration directly impinges on the nutrition information gap by requiring sugar advertisers to fund positive messages addressed to children on nutrition and dental health. Another proposal being considered would require that advertising stressing the 'energy' in foods would also have to disclose the calories.

Toward A National Policy on Nutrition

There is widespread agreement that a broadly defined food and nutrition policy should assure an adequate, safe, palatable, nutritionally balanced, reasonably priced food supply available to all Americans. However, we have not been able to go much beyond such a broad, generalized statement to define specific programs. The consensus necessary for establishing a comprehensive national food and nutrition policy does not yet exist, Dr. Peter Bourne told the conference. The policy planning process is impeded by two significant factors: lack of useful and creditable scientific data on the relationship between diet and health available to policy planners, and the lack of agreement on how to resolve disagreements and competing priorities.

John Kramer, of the Georgetown University Law Center, Special Counsel to the Committee on Agriculture, and the House Subcommittee on Welfare Reform, said consumers should forget about achieving a national nutrition policy and concentrate