Scientists Reject Lawyer's Claim that "Fast Food" Should Be Labeled "Addictive"

By ACSH Staff — June 19, 2003

The American Council on Science and Health (ACSH) today characterized as "ludicrous" the assertion by law professor John Banzhaf that high-fat, high-sugar foods are addictive. ACSH dismissed as scientifically unfounded Mr. Banzhaf's demand that "fast food" restaurants alert customers that the foods they serve induce physiological changes that leave consumers vulnerable to overeating. ACSH scientists also noted that it is simplistic and counterproductive to target specific foods and food establishments as the cause of the nation's obesity crisis.

"It is patently absurd to label any food 'addictive'," noted Dr. Elizabeth Whelan, ACSH's president. "There is overwhelming evidence that drugs including nicotine are physiologically addictive, but there is no scientific evidence whatsoever to justify this characterization of food. Further, there is nothing unique about the food meat, dairy products, bread, and vegetables sold at establishments such as Burger King or McDonald's. Those very same foods are served daily in homes across the country. Will the claim soon be made that all food is addictive?

"Obesity is far too serious an issue for petty publicity stunts that attempt to place the blame for obesity squarely on restaurants," explained Dr. Whelan. "This approach is a disservice to public health because it distracts consumers from the documented, underlying causes of obesity: consuming too many calories from all foods and not burning sufficient calories to keep intake and output in balance," Dr. Whelan noted. "Americans need to limit their caloric intake to levels appropriate for their age and activity level. That solution is far more difficult than simply slapping warning labels on restaurant doors but it is the only scientifically based solution, and it is the only one that will work."

"Instead of encouraging healthy diet and exercise, his simplistic approach to America's obesity problem will solve nothing and help no one except perhaps trial lawyers like himself," added Dr. Gilbert Ross, ACSH's Medical Director. "This attempt to label 'fast food' addictive, and thus relieve consumers of their own responsibility for overeating, irresponsibly conflates the dangers of real addictive behaviors, such as cigarette smoking, with food choices we have always made."