Experts Chew the Fat about Fat

By ACSH Staff — June 16, 2003

The American obesity epidemic is a hot topic. Anyone who doubts that views diverge on what should be done about it should have attended the conference on "Obesity, Individual Responsibility, and Public Policy" at the American Enterprise Institute on June 10. Experts from a variety of fields debated the question of whether obesity is increasing, who or what should be held responsible, and what should be done about it.

- Dr. Frank Hu of the Harvard School of Public Health presented a wealth of data showing the increase in obesity over the past few decades as well as its correlation with type 2 diabetes and heart disease. Countering Dr. Hu, Dr. Glenn Gaesser from the University of Virginia claimed that the health threats were not really due to obesity per se, but rather to a sedentary lifestyle. Dr. Gaesser said that his data indicates that it is possible to be physically fit even when fat.

- I discussed the biological factors, such as genetics and metabolism, that underlie human obesity, while Dr. Tomas Philipson from the University of Chicago described technological factors now contributing to obesity: modern society makes food cheaper and movement less frequent.

- Dr. Sally Satel of AEI, a practicing psychiatrist, expressed the view that addiction is not a term that should be applied to food, although that is the basis of some obesity lawsuits. She said that the term addiction "can be stretched until it's meaningless." Nonetheless, another AEI scholar, Michael Greve, predicted an increasing number of lawsuits against purveyers of "junk foods" like soft drinks.

- Dr. Richard Carmona, U.S. Surgeon General, noted that two thirds of Americans are now considered overweight and that 15% of those under eighteen are considered clinically obese. Dr. Carmona expressed the Bush administration's view that the most important aspect of dealing with Americans' obesity is preventing it in the young, partly through federal efforts. Greg Critser, author of the popular book Fat Land, urged local action by parents.

- Dr. Kelly Brownell of Yale University discussed the increasing presence of food advertising aimed at children and the increasing size of soft drinks available. He promoted the removal of soft drinks from school vending machines and decried the overwhelming presence of food in American life. Dr. Brownell expressed the view that Americans are living in a "toxic" food environment and thought that so-called "junk foods" should be taxed. In contrast, John Calfee of AEI argued that food advertising does not cause consumers to eat more but rather is a mechanism for getting them to alter brand preferences.

The conference reached no consensus about obesity, but all the views expressed may help America find its way toward a solution.