

Vending Machines a Hazard to Children?

By ACSH Staff — May 14, 2004

The "food police" are at it again. This week the Center for Science in the Public Interest released a "study" (see <http://cspinet.org/new/200405111.html> [1]) claiming that vending machines in middle and high schools dispense drinks and snacks of poor nutritional value, leaving our kids at risk of obesity and general poor health. CSPI proposes that this alleged problem be solved by increasing government authority over what is served and eaten in schools. Specifically, the group notes that the Department of Agriculture (USDA) currently has little or no authority to regulate foods sold outside the official school lunch program and they call upon Congress to give USDA authority to regulate the sale of vending machine goodies.

We here at ACSH have long criticized CSPI for calling attention to, and demanding regulatory authority over, problems that simply do not exist. In this case, however, the CSPI folks are raising an important health concern: the growing number of American children who are overweight or just plain obese. But true to form, CSPI proves that the old adage is correct: "For every complex problem there is a simple solution and it is always wrong."

Here are just a few of the problems associated with CSPI's plan to attack childhood obesity and poor nutrition by getting the Feds to banish sodas and snacks:

First, those declaring that vending machines sell "junk food" have never defined what junk food is. Is it a food that is high in calories? High in sugar? High in fat? Low in nutrient density? Both juice and sugar-sweetened soda contain substantial amounts of sugar and calories. Is a serving of 100% orange and apple juice with its 150 calories "junk"? If Coke and Pepsi were to fortify their sodas with vitamins and minerals (some smaller soda companies are already doing this), would soda be transmogrified from a junk food to a health food? And what about the high-fat avocado? Will that be banned too?

Second, CSPI appears to have conflated two distinct issues here: obesity and poor nutrition. There are very few nutritionists who are concerned that a substantial proportion of our kids are not getting sufficient nutrients (except in some very specific cases) on a daily basis. The real problem before us is overnutrition, not undernutrition specifically, the overconsumption of calories relative to the number of calories burned and the resulting accumulation of excess pounds. All foods in our diet, and in the diets of our kids, do not need to be "nutrient dense." There is room in life for "fun foods"; the key is using them in moderation as part of a varied, balanced diet. In other words, despite the "good food/bad food" dichotomy on which CSPI bases its recommendations, all of us can consume soda, desserts, or bourbon (adult fun food?) without becoming obese if we consume these in moderation and keep physically active.

Given that the real problem we are addressing is obesity, it makes no sense whatsoever to replace soda in schools with fruit juices as CSPI and others have recommended.

Third, CSPI has never met a problem that they did not think "big government" could solve. But the reality is that the only way we are going to meet the obesity threat head-on is to educate our children about what their caloric needs are and what the caloric content of various foods are while encouraging them to participate regularly in physical exercise.

But, many parents might argue, what would be the downside of getting rid of all the food and drink vending machines banning them outright from all schools? On one hand, such a move might communicate a message not often heard these days: eating and drinking all day is not a requirement for good health and nutrition indeed, just the opposite seems to be true. Perhaps eliminating the vending machines would send the good, old-fashioned message that you should eat three square meals a day and forget the frequent snacking. (More than thirty years ago, it was unusual to eat and drink during all waking hours. Today's non-stop obsession with food is new.) On the other hand, forbidding the sale of soft drinks and snacks, particularly in high school, might put these products in a "forbidden fruit" category that would make them seem even more attractive once the final school bell rang and the kids were outside the regulatory authority of the USDA. What better way to learn how to make informed, intelligent choices about when and how much to eat than in school?

Anyone who has evaluate the statistics must agree that our children and young adults are increasingly overweight to the point that their health is compromised. This problem must be addressed in a systematic, scientific way, giving as much attention to the exercise portion of the equation as we do to the food consumption part. Targeting specific foods as culprits only distracts us from solutions that will work.

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[1] <http://cspinet.org/new/200405111.html>