ACSH challenges animal tests as cancer indicator in humans

By ACSH Staff — April 11, 2005

HOUSTON (CNI)--Don't trust laboratory rats when it comes to chemical and food health safety.

That's one of the messages of the American Council on Science and Health (ACSH), a group that combats what it perceives as unnecessary public hysteria over whether certain chemicals, food additives and other substances can cause cancer in humans.

Scientists associated with ACSH recently proclaimed there was "no likely risk to human health associated with the levels of PFOA perfluorooctanoic acid to which the general public is exposed". ACSH disputed "claims by some journalists, litigators and environmentalists that people are at risk from PFOA in the environment."

DuPont and other fluoropolymer manufacturers have agreed to reduce the amount of PFOA in liquid products sold to other manufacturers. PFOA is used in the manufacture of products such as Teflon but the chemical does not wind up in the final product.

Founded in 1978, ACSH describes itself as a consumer education consortium concerned with issues related to food, nutrition, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, lifestyle, the environment and health. It was founded by a group of scientists "who had become concerned that many important public policies related to health and the environment did not have a sound scientific basis," said ACSH.

Associate director of ACSH, Jeff Stier, said one of the things that his group opposes is the sole reliance on laboratory animal tests to proclaim that various substances can cause cancer in humans. He said his group questioned the idea that a substance can cause cancer in humans because it causes cancer in lab rats after long-term and massive exposure.

Stier said his group believed that the testing of animals plays a valid role in public health safety issues, but added that such testing should not be the sole factor in determining whether a substance can cause cancer in humans. "We don't oppose animal testing but we want people to be sceptical," he said.

Stier said scientists have yet to develop the technology that would allow them to nail down whether a substance can cause cancer in humans.

ACSH is also currently addressing the hot topic of obesity.

Stier said the US Department of Agriculture recently issued dietary guidelines that are designed to combat obesity. "If Americans followed those guidelines there would be a drastic lifestyle change - but it requires willpower," he said.

"The problem is that most Americans don't eat that way," Stier said. Some activist groups believe
everybody should just stick to the dietary guidelines, but Stier said that isn't realistic.

Some activist groups oppose food additives," Stier said, "but chemicals and food technology can narrow the gap between what we can eat and what we should be eating".

For example, if a person drank two cans of Coca-Cola a day and switched to the 1-calorie diet version, he or she could shed 20 pounds a year if no other factors changed, Stier said.

Stier bristled at accusations by some activist groups that the ACSH is a front organisation for the food additive and chemical industries. He said the group gets its funding from a wide array of corporations, organisations and individuals but he declined to specify them. "The donations are made with no strings attached," he said.

Stier said ACSH reports are independently peer-reviewed.