

Benefits of Overweight Still Hush-Hush

By ACSH Staff — April 27, 2005

As the public health community began digesting the much anticipated new food pyramid last week, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), to its credit, released a new study suggesting that previous obesity-related mortality estimations were grossly overstated and that, get this, being slightly overweight actually adds to longevity.

When the CDC last year estimated the annual death toll from obesity at 400,000, many scientists questioned the numbers. The new CDC study now estimates 25,814 extra deaths per year as a result of the combined negative effects of obesity and positive effects of overweight.

Yet CDC Director Dr. Julie Gerberding said the CDC will not use its own new and highly regarded data in publicity campaigns, claiming that the different numbers are too complicated to communicate to the public. It seems that the end justifies the means: by not using the new data, it will be easier for the fat-fighting CDC to keep obesity in the headlines. The new, more accurate facts, would only make that job harder.

But is overstating the case the right thing to do? When some anti-tobacco activists overstated the case against secondhand smoke and the truth finally came out -- that secondhand smoke, while harmful to some and annoying to most, is not the killer some said -- the entire anti-smoking community took a credibility hit. That's not good, given that smoking really *is* the number one preventable cause of death in this country -- and will continue to be number one, despite the drumbeat over obesity.

Similarly, when cereal marketers went beyond the data to claim that dietary fiber prevents colon cancer and then leading journals debunked the claim, the headlines read "Dietary Fiber Not So Good After All." Indeed, dietary fiber is an important part of the diet, as the new food pyramid reinforces. Yet now, many people simply recall that dietary fiber isn't as good as once thought, and they may not make the effort to consume the required amount.

Obesity is still a serious public health concern, especially for those most overweight. The new food pyramid should help re-focus attention on the real nutrition and weight-control issues. But the government should not mislead us in an effort to protect us.

By exaggerating and misleading, do-gooders do more harm than good. The news stories that claim coffee/wine/water/etc. is good for you one month and dangerous the next erode the public's trust in the very public health organizations we look to for guidance.

Overstating the case is not only dishonest, it is counterproductive.

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UPDATE: Dr. Ben England has [some thoughts on obesity and "junk reporting"](#) [1] at his GalensLog

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