Take Food Cops' Advice with a Grain of Salt -- Until That's Banned, Too

By ACSH Staff — July 12, 2006

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Dr. Sylvester Graham -- who was born in 1794 and died in 1851 -- has been re-incarnated. His new name is Michael Jacobson, founder and director of the Washington-based "food police," operating under the name the Center for Science in the Public Interest.

Like his modern-day counterpart, Graham pontificated about "good" foods and "bad" foods -- and urged people to eat only fruits and vegetables, avoid "artificial preparation" of food, and eschew salt, meat, white flour, sugar, and alcohol. He had his own journal, Graham's Journal of Health and Longevity. The only difference between the two: Graham started his own commercial line of food products (including the famous cracker named after him), and Jacobson has not done that -- at least not yet.

Jacobson and his army of do-gooders, equipped with a direct line to the mainstream media, tell us almost daily what we should and should eat, warn us of dire threats in the food supply, and use the threat of litigation and regulation to protect us from ourselves.

--CSPI is currently waging jihad against dietary fats in general and trans fats in particular. Jacobson characterizes trans fat as a toxin -- or poison -- and claims that its presence in food causes 50,000 or more deaths from heart disease annually. Recently, CSPI sued Yum Brands, which owns Kentucky Fried Chicken, because KFC uses partially hydrogenated oils to prepare many of the Colonel's most popular fried dishes. Always ready with colorful rhetoric, Jacobson refers to the risk of "Kentucky Fried Coronaries."

The irony here is that from 1984 to 1990 CSPI was actually promoting the use of hydrogenated oils and defending trans fats -- threatening restaurants with lawsuits if they did not switch from beef tallow to hydrogenated oils for deep frying. While it's true that trans fats can lower levels of "good" cholesterol, their tendency to raise levels of "bad" cholesterol is one they share with ordinary saturated fats.

In these days of accelerating obesity prevalence, all of us should be attentive to fat consumption -- given the caloric wallop fat carries (nine calories per gram). But to single out trans fats as the scapegoat -- and to demand zero tolerance for trans fats -- is without scientific merit.
The food police also regularly alarm us about "carcinogens" in food, including saccharin and acrylamide (which forms when high-carbohydrate foods, like potatoes, are fried or baked). CSPI never notes the fact that the "carcinogen" designation is based on high-dose animal studies that have no relevance for predicting human cancer risk.

Salt is a dietary killer, CSPI says, accounting for over 150,000 premature deaths each year. Rumor has it that CSPI will soon petition the FDA to remove salt from the list of ingredients that are GRAS (generally recognized as safe). Dr. Graham would have been proud.

Alcohol is evil, the food police tell us (the word "moderation" does not seem to be part of their vocabulary). In fact, CSPI has a whole division calling for everything short of a return to Prohibition. Never mind that prudent use of beverage alcohol can raise levels of the "good" cholesterol and possibly offer us some protection from heart disease.

CSPI never met a regulation or tax they did not love. How to solve the obesity crisis? Tax soda, ban its sale in schools, mandate that restaurants carry detailed nutrition labels on menus, and sue McDonald's for luring children to eat "fast food" (even though a cheeseburger at home has essentially the same nutritional and caloric profile as a meal at a fast food joint).

And while wringing their meddling hands over obesity, the food police conduct a holy war against olestra, the fat substitute that could offer us a full variety of tasty, reduced-calorie foods (their charges that olestra caused serious and unique gastrointestinal effects were not scientifically supported, as explained in an ACSH report [2]).

Sylvester Graham's nutrition advocacy ardor eventually burned out and he became a poet. Perhaps his successor and his deputies in today's food police might also consider an alternative vocation -- and leave us alone to enjoy our food in peace and serenity.

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