Morbidly Obtuse: NYC's planned trans fat ban is being fed by a diet of nonsense

By ACSH Staff — November 2, 2006

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On October 30, a diverse collection of New Yorkers -- and nutrition activists from outside New York -- gathered at the Heath Department to offer their view on the proposed City ban on trans fats in restaurant fare. Hundreds of others poured into the hearing room just to learn if it really was true that a killer was on the loose in City eateries.

Emotions ran high as witness after witness characterized trans fats in French fries, doughnuts, and spreads as an imminent threat to health. "Trans fats kill babies!" intoned Councilman Peter Vallone during a press conference.

At a mid-day "trans fat-free rally" activists celebrated in the park. Ding dong, the witch is dead! Trans fat phobia was rampant at this municipal circus, and the facts were largely irrelevant.

But the facts tell a different story than the horror narrative. That is why my organization -- the American Council on Science and Health -- offered testimony opposing the ban. Why? Because it will not make New Yorkers healthier. Indeed, such a move may actually contribute to the toll of premature death by diverting our attention from the real causes of heart disease.

High levels of dietary trans fats, derived primarily from partially hydrogenated vegetable oils, can raise levels of LDL, the so-called "bad cholesterol." But TFAs are only one of several dietary factors that affect blood lipids and, more importantly, serum cholesterol is only one of several factors that may influence the risk of heart disease. Cigarette smoking and high blood pressure, as well as diabetes and obesity, contribute far more to heart disease than any specific dietary factor.

Any practicing physician who has treated patients with elevated cholesterol levels will tell you that even the strictest low-fat diets often result in only modest cholesterol reduction. So how could we expect significant effects on LDL cholesterol from banishing levels of just one type of fat -- one that represents only about 2% of our total daily calorie intake, and which does not contribute more calories than other types of fat? Those individuals with unhealthy lipid levels, of course, should choose polyunsaturated or monounsaturated fats. It's saturated fats, not trans fats, that they should be concerned about -- because they represent over 10%, maybe 15% of calories. Such individuals need to discuss with their physicians the option of cholesterol-lowering drugs, but for most of us, this is unnecessary.

Given the scientific facts, then, why is there such an uproar about TFA?

cFirst, in recent years, public health authorities have increasingly turned to regulation to combat chronic disease in a fashion similar to using regulation to fight infectious disease -- requiring water
chlorination, inoculations, and so forth. An example is the City Health Department's decision in January to make diabetes a reportable disease -- in the same way that sexually transmitted diseases are reportable. The problem is that government intervention for chronic diseases, which are primarily linked to lifestyle factors, is intrusive and simply will not work. By calling for a ban on TFAs on City menus, the public health establishment is responding as if TFAs were an imminent health threat -- like listeria in deli meats. They are not.

Second, as the hyperbole about TFAs has escalated -- with a New York Times columnist recently opining that TFAs in Girl Scout cookies have killed more Americans than Al Qaeda -- physicians and scientists have largely remained mute on the topic. Silence is interpreted as agreement -- and the momentum for bans builds.

Third, the food industry has turned the fear of TFAs into a brilliant marketing strategy -- trumpeting the "No Trans Fats" claim on labels. Unsuspecting customers will conclude the products are healthier -- and maybe even think they are reduced in calories -- when in fact there are no health benefits. All fats, saturated or not, contain nine calories per gram. There are no caloric savings from replacing TFAs with other fats. On October 30, Kentucky Fried Chicken decided to cash in on the trans fat mania announcing -- while the hearings were in process -- that it was phasing out all use of the much-maligned substances. KFC practically claimed that their new line of products, once TFA-free, would be eligible for the Health Food Hall of Fame.

What will replace the allegedly malicious TFAs? In the late 1980s, the Ralph Nader-inspired Center for Science in the Public Interest fomented a frenzy about the beef tallow that fast food restaurants used to fry potatoes because it contains cholesterol-raising saturated fats -- and demanded that they stop it. And what did CSPI recommend to take its place? Partially hydrogenated vegetable oils with TFAs. Now the wheel has turned and CSPI is outraged over trans fats.

We have lost perspective on the important threats to New Yorkers' health: smoking, obesity, excessive alcohol use, and more. And if we ban trans fats, we move one step closer to endorsing the principle that government should determine what we eat and how we should live -- even when the data and expected benefits are skimpy.

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