ACSH Dispatches Round-Up

By ACSH Staff — December 21, 2007

December 17, 2007: Of Drugs—Real and Not—and Kidneys

• Quote to Note: “Theoretically, kidneys should be in booming supply. Virtually everyone has two, and healthy individuals can give one away and still lead perfectly normal lives. Yet people aren’t exactly lining up to give.” – ACSH advisor Dr. Sally Satel in the New York Sunday Times Magazine.

• ACSH friend Dr. Scott Gottlieb, an AEI fellow, echoed ACSH’s position on the importance of allowing scientific communication regarding off-label drug use in today’s in an op ed in the Wall Street Journal. Dr. Gottlieb emphasized the human victims that result when politics intrudes into medical practice – a very important theme here at ACSH. We encourage you to read the piece if you have not already done so [1] (subscription required).

• Also echoing ACSH’s previous positions was a New York Times front-page story tracing drugs from their origins in China through the Middle East until finally they were imported to the United States [2]. ACSH staffers found the descriptions very scary – free trade zones allow a large market for counterfeit drug makers, making the drugs difficult to trace and regulate. The drugs that the counterfeiters manufacture include Lipitor and Nexium.

ACSH’s Dr. Gilbert Ross pointed out that these are often the “Canadian” drugs that unwary American consumers order on the internet and which some politicians (who should know better) are trying to make more accessible. These politicians often fail to acknowledge the risk, as described in today’s Times (and earlier in ACSH’s paper [3]).

“What an incredibly lucrative business that is,” ACSH’s Dr. Elizabeth Whelan said. Some of these businesses make legitimate drugs in the morning and switch to fakes in the afternoon, according to the Times report. As ACSH’s Dr. Ruth Kava explained, this allows those businesses to meticulously imitate the look of these drugs, with the correct colors and letters imprinted upon them. But the scary fact remains the same – the content of those fake drugs are just that, fake. As Dr. Whelan summed up: “How terrifying.”

• ACSH raised questions about the decision by city officials in Los Angeles to shut down and drain reservoirs in the city because they found a “carcinogen” in the water [4]. Our problem is that the “carcinogen” may be an animal one and here at ACSH, we like to point out the limited application of animal cancer tests. Even if that is not the case, officials even admitted that you have to drink a vast quantity water for many years to face any risk from this “carcinogen,” so the risk is very limited.

• Finally, this weekend we read a poignant personal story from ACSH advisor Dr. Sally Satel about her journey to find a donor to replace one of her failing kidneys [5]. The article in the New York Sunday Times Magazine reminded us of our own Jeff Stier’s writings on organ donation. Both Dr. Satel’s and Stier’s [6] underlying message was the importance of offering incentives for organ donations.

December 18, 2007: Fertility, Futility and Junk Science from Harvard

• Quote to Note: "It had been a challenge to balance the limitations of scientific research with the commercial demands of book publishing.” – Tara Park-Pope in a New York Times article about the book "The Fertility Diet,” paraphrasing lead author Dr. Jorge E. Chavarro.

• When researchers from the University of Michigan conducted a survey of more than 2,000 parents, they found that most parents said their children were "about" the right weight. But when they looked at the numbers, the scientists discovered that 25 percent of the children were overweight or obese. More than 40 percent of the parents of obese children were unaware of their children’s status [7].

As Dr. Kava noted, one of the things we've been saying here at ACSH is that parents must be involved if we are going to deal with
childhood obesity, but how are we going to get them involved if they think their children are fine? You can ban junk food all you want at schools, but what if parents continue to feed their “normal weight” children highly-caloric foods at home, where kids actually do most of their eating? Can we really expect the children to lose weight?

• In the past couple weeks we’ve watched New York City turn into a winter wonderland. Also reminding us of the holiday season are the many wonderful donations and gifts – large and small – we have received from many of you. We are so appreciative of them.

If you would like to make your donation before the end of the year, please call Judy at 866-905-2694. To make a donation of appreciated assets (stocks), please call Kelly at the same number. Happy Holidays!

• Yesterday San Francisco’s mayor proposed a tax on sugary soft drinks – all in the name of public health [8]). We wonder, why stop at sodas? What about apple juice, which provides little nutritional value but almost as many calories as soda? And what about whole milk, which is just as calorie-dense and has loads of fat as well? Although the mayor’s spokesman Nathan Ballard says the mayor “has no intention of imposing a fee on pizza,” we are curious as to where the slippery slope of banning caloric “unhealthy” foods will end.

As Dr. Whelan said, “It reminds me of the adage, ‘For every complex problem there is a simple solution, and it never works.’

• Can a fertility book get you pregnant? Depends on with whom you're reading it, joked ACSH's Dr. Gil Ross. The New York Times' Tara Parker-Pope agrees with our disbelief. In her review of the Fertility Diet, by Dr. Chavarro and Dr. Walter Willett [9], Parker-Pope debunks the implied promise that this book can "miraculously" help previously infertile women become pregnant.

There are some truths in the book, but they seem to be stretches – the diet could enhance fertility if it helped obese women to lose weight or underweight women gain weight, thereby regulating their ovulatory cycles. But otherwise, ACSH's Dr. Ruth Kava said, it's just as fertility researcher and director of New York University Fertility Center Dr. Jamie A Grifo said: "It's marketing."

One other thing Parker-Pope said in her article particularly piqued our interest: While there are other books out there touting fertility diets, "the difference is that the newest book comes from Harvard." While Harvard is an esteemed university, lately we've been disappointed with the Harvard School of Public Health. The publication of “The Fertility Diet” by Dr. Chavarro and Dr. Willett represents a new low for the Harvard School of Public Health. It falls in the same category of HSPH awarding its highest honor for public health achievement two years ago to Erin Brockovich, who ACSH’s Dr. Elizabeth Whelan calls a poster child for junk science.

December 19, 2007: OF COWS, CANCER, AND PRODUCE

• Quote to Note: "There is increased life expectancy in these developing countries and cancer, of course, being a disease of older people, we are starting to see it more." – Dr. Otis Brawley, American Cancer Society chief medical officer, on cancer rates going up in the developing world.

• Sometimes we feel like we're beating a dead horse (or cow?) when it comes to irradiation. Yet another article appeared in today's Wall Street Journal about the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s efforts to reduce E. coli in meat [10] (subscription required) – and once again there is absolutely no mention of irradiation, a safe, science-based technology that kills bacteria in foods [11]. "It's just another example of ignoring the obvious," ACSH's Dr. Elizabeth Whelan said.

• Other bovine news is in the field of "cloned food." Meat producers are tagging cloned cows with small radio-frequency identifiers (RFIDs) [12] (subscription required). These tags will be entered into registries and producers who purchase the cloned cattle will have to sign affidavits promising to market the products correctly. This system helps retailers who don’t want to sell milk and meat from cloned animals, as well as to reassure concerned customers, the WSJ reports.

"What positive influence is this having other than furthering the false belief that this is harmful?” asked Dr. Whelan. "It's irrational!” Furthermore, the headline is incorrect -- it's not "cloned food" because the meat that would be sold is from the progeny of the cloned cow. “This is an example of the media spreading false information about a food issue,” noted ACSH’s Dr. Ruth Kava.

• ACSH doesn't always appreciate Mayor Bloomberg's grand plans -- don't get staffers started on his trans fats ban. But the city's offer of 1,500 extra permits to fruit and vegetable street vendors [13] is an ACSH-approved (and ACSH-endorsed!) move. With
more street vendors available in poorer neighborhoods, there will be a larger quantity of healthier options available for the residents. Providing more opportunities to easily purchase produce is a step that has the potential to improve overall health and lower obesity prevalence much more than banning trans fats or requiring postings of caloric content on restaurant menus ever could.

• The first global cancer study reported that 7.6 million cancer deaths will have occurred by the end of 2007. About 12 million new cancer cases will have been diagnosed by the year’s end [14].

Looking at underlying factors causing cancer, Dr. Brawley, the American Cancer Society chief medical officer quoted above, said the developing world can take a page from more developed countries. In the United States, for instance, anti-smoking campaigns have lowered cancer rates. Also, the new HPV vaccine can largely reduce the risk of cervical cancer, a leading killer of women in the less-developed world.

This is good news, ACSH staffers agree. When people hear cancer rates are going up, most think it’s a terrible thing. In reality, an increase in cancer rates globally simply means people are living long enough to eventually get cancer. However, many of these cancers are preventable (for instance, lung cancer and cervical cancer). We hope health officials focus on priorities such as smoking cessation and HPV vaccinations (rather than non-threats such as acrylamide in food and traces of chemicals in the environment) to further extend life expectancy.

• ACSH also recommends reading Jeff Stier’s blog [15] on Huffington Post about our new Web site, Riskometer.org [16]. The site is years in the making, and we want as many people to benefit from it as possible. If you have blogs of your own, we encourage you to link to it. Thanks!

December 20, 2007: Calories, Champagne and Flu Shots

• Quote to Note: “I’ve seen people hanging on stair climbers who think they are doing 1,200 calories an hour. They probably are doing 600 calories an hour.” – Dr. William Haskell, an exercise physiologist at Stanford.

• Think that half an hour on the stair climber balances the piece of pumpkin pie you ate with dinner? Think again – even if the calorie-counter on the machine tells you that you’ve burned 500 calories, you shouldn’t trust it to give you an accurate reading.

In today’s New York Times Style section Gina Kolata explains why the calorie count is most likely to be inaccurate [17]. Calculations are based on an “average person,” ACSH’s Dr. Ruth Kava explained, and they don’t take into consideration an individual’s age, height, intensity of exercise or efficiency. When it comes to exercise, you actually want to be “inefficient” to burn the most calories. Also, as Kolata writes, when exercisers lean on the bars of a stair climber they decrease calories burned by about 40 percent.

As you’ve read in previous Morning Dispatches, ACSH staffers are big proponents of pedometers to track exercise. But Dr. Kava said even those are not entirely accurate – they give you a ballpark figure but you never know whether the readings are above or below the true value.

Any exercise is good for a healthy lifestyle – depending on your own exercise capability and condition of heart, lungs and joints – but just don’t assume that the 1200 calories your treadmill tells you you’ve “burned” in the past hour means you have exactly 1200 more calories you’re allowed to eat that day.

• ACSH staffer were concerned that potential Republican presidential candidate Mayor Rudolph Giuliani was hospitalized due to flu symptoms. The story, though, piqued our curiosity – did our ex-Mayor get his flu shot?

Our first instinct tells us he did – we’re sure his campaign managers would encourage it, as he’s on the campaign trail shaking hands with hundreds of people every day. We also assume he (and his managers) realize how devastating a disease influenza is – flu and its complications kill about 36,000 Americans every year [18]. Still, just because Giuliani may have contracted the flu does not mean he failed to get his influenza vaccination – the flu shot is not 100 percent effective. But any protection is better than none – get your flu shot, it’s not too late!

• As the year winds down, it’s only appropriate to look back at 2007. Here at ACSH, we compiled our Top 10 list of Unfounded Health Scares. Check it out on Health News Digest [19].
We received several angry and rambling e-mails regarding some of the entries on our list – including two individuals denouncing our claims that fluoride is safe. But, as ACSH’s Dr. Elizabeth Whelan said with a laugh, “The fan mail keeps me going!”

- **A new study has been published showing obese people who need kidney transplants are far less likely to get them than “normal” weight people** [20]. Why? The reason is both economic and medical.

As ACSH has been saying for a while now, the health effects of obesity do not start and end with heart problems. Stay tuned for a new ACSH book on the health effects of obesity coming out within the year.

- **When it comes to risks around the holiday season, there are both real risks and overstated ones. What poses a greater risk – eating holiday cookies with trans fats or opening a bottle of champagne? From our families to yours, ACSH urges you to be careful when uncorking your favorite bottle of bubbly during the holiday season** [21]!

**December 21, 2007: "Dangerous" Toys, Snacks and Races; Common Sense on Food Contamination**

- **Quote to Note:** “The destruction of massive amounts of meat, demands for more government regulation of meat processing, and inspections by government agents aren’t the solutions. Irradiation of the final product with Cobalt 60 or Cesium 137 is safe, effective and economical. It kills the bacteria and does no harm to the food.” – Dr. Ralph C. Whaley in a letter to the editor in the WSJ about the benefits of food irradiation

- **As Christmas fast approaches, thoughts turn toward presents like children’s toys. But what about all those toy recalls? What’s safe? What’s toxic? Our own Jeff Stier wrote an op ed in today’s New York Post about the lack of discretion used when recalling products with tiny traces of lead in them. While certain products should be recalled – such as jewelry which children can easily put in their mouths – there is no public health-related reason to recall products like easels merely because some trace of paint on one side contains an amount of lead that exceeds an arbitrary federal standard.**

Today’s Wall Street Journal also takes a look at the lead-paint-in-toys issue, finding that while millions of toys were recalled this summer, more parents said they were little or not at all concerned by the recalls than there were parents who said they were concerned. “There are some customers who, to be honest, couldn’t care less,” said Erik Kolb, an analyst who conducted the survey. Perhaps consumers are smarter than the media gives them credit for and already realized what Stier wrote about in his op ed today?

- **When ACSH staffers heard that Westchester County in New York is planning a trans fat ban, we were very concerned. But the restrictions on the ban (pie crusts, cookies and cakes are exceptions to the no-trans-fats rule) made us realize the folks in Westchester are cleverer than we first thought. As most trans fats are used in these baked products, we interpret this ban as the county preserving its baked goodies while appeasing the anti-trans fats activists.**

- **ACSH’s Dr. Elizabeth Whelan found the latest issue of the British Medical Journal very disappointing. The Journal published a list of “fluffy” health myths, such as that hair and nails actually do not continue to grow once you die. Next time the Journal wants to publish this type of article, it should ask ACSH for some myths that would have a much bigger impact on public health. Two we would add: The idea that organic food is somehow “healthier” and “safer” than conventionally grown produce, and that phthalates in children’s plastic toys pose “health risks.”**

- **Today in the New York Times Gina Kolata wrote about how running marathons is not as deadly as often thought. It’s not that there’s no risk in running a marathon, simply there’s more risk if you drove the distance of a marathon than if you ran it. Kolata cited a study that found fewer than 1 in 100,000 people died while running the marathon. (Of course, ACSH’s Dr. Gil Ross pointed out, running a marathon, as all exercise, should be individually guided based upon each individual’s health status, and after consultation with a physician).**

Kolata noted that comparing risks between driving and running is unique. Here at ACSH this method reminds us of our Riskometer.

- **Also putting risk in perspective was an article published today about a young British father who died from chickenpox (varicella is the medical name for the causative virus). He was 37 years old. Stories about the supposed dangers of vaccinations are commonly splattered across the pages of our newspapers, but rarely do we see the examples of why these immunizations are important. Before the chickenpox vaccine was introduced in 1995, 14 million people came down with the chickenpox yearly. Now, thanks to the vaccination, that number is much lower. When weighing the risks and benefits of immunizations, it’s key to keep in mind the dangerous complications of the diseases.**
• Today’s honorary seat at ACSH’s morning meeting table goes to Dr. Ralph C. Whaley. He wrote a very ACSH-minded letter to the editor in the Wall Street Journal about the importance of food irradiation. His letter, appropriately titled “Nuke the Critters in Meat,” noted that irradiation would “save enormous amounts of food, money and effort and would eliminate” the problem of recurring episodes of meat contamination.

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