

# NYC Food Cops' National Agenda

By ACSH Staff — September 8, 2008

This piece first appeared [on September 8, 2008 in the \[1\] New York Post \[1\]](#):

If the city Health Department gets its way, government officials -- local, state and federal -- will soon be deciding what you can and can't eat.

Writing in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* last month, Drs. Lynn Silver and Mary Bassett (both of the Health Department) argue that Americans eat too much fat, sugar, salt and calories and that it's up to government to take urgent action to protect citizens from "unhealthy food" -- in other words, to protect people from themselves.

Specifically, the doctors call on government to take immediate emergency action to force the food industry to make "healthier" food, including placing hefty taxes on fare they deem unhealthy -- thus contributing to the already soaring price of food.

They reject government guidelines and education as "relatively weak interventions" and argue that "stronger actions are needed immediately to reduce obesity, hypertension, heart disease and other chronic ills."

Their arguments are as perplexing as they are controversial:

¢They equate today's chronic diseases with the foodborne diseases that government fought a century ago. Just as we dramatically reduced those ills, they argue, similar government intervention to alter how Americans eat is the answer to our high-calorie diet.

This ignores the obvious difference: The battle against tainted food involved eliminating contaminants that no one believed should be there; the overriding cause of obesity, by contrast, has little to do with what's in our food -- and everything to do with how much we overeat and how little we exercise.

(Their justification for such government action? Government picks up the tab for chronic-illness care -- so it should have the power to dictate what we eat.)

¢They strictly divide "healthy" from "unhealthy" foods and suggest we follow Britain's lead by placing green symbols on healthy food and red ones on the "bad" stuff.

But how would one make that distinction? Is a McDonald's cheeseburger (rich in protein) unhealthy? How about a couple of Oreos with a glass of milk after school? An avocado is loaded with fat and calories -- does that go on the unhealthy list? What about calorie-filled, sugary orange juice?

The simple truth is that all these things can be part of a healthy diet -- in moderation.

¢The authors' science is questionable.

For example, they call for restrictions on sodium, which they claim causes 150,000 excess deaths each year due to hypertension and stroke. In fact, while some individuals are "salt sensitive" and may experience a slight decline in blood pressure from salt reduction, the same isn't true for most people.

Indeed, Dr. John Laragh -- the founder of the American Society of Hypertension - says: "Is there any proven reason for us to grossly modify our salt intake?...Generally speaking, the answer is a resounding no."

¢They argue that "the ubiquity of food [has become] treacherous" and that food should be regulated like alcohol and cigarettes, "putting reasonable limits on where and how [food] can be sold...amending zoning [to] limit the number or density of locations selling unhealthy foods in restaurants, vending machines and other outlets."

In other words, the Food Police is getting warmed up for a major government push to make us eat healthier -- whether or not we want to.

The tragedy of these proposals is twofold:

First, eating habits are culturally determined and very hard to change. People want to eat what they want -- they want choice and don't want to hear that the only tomato juice they can buy is the dreadful-tasting "low-sodium" kind.

Second, the Health Department -- ripe from its victory in banning trans fats in city restaurants -- sees regulation and punitive action as the only ways to reduce calorie consumption.

The article doesn't even mention one nonregulatory solution: encouraging the food industry to use technology to dramatically cut calories in the food people love.

By widely using the fat substitute olestra in cookies, cakes, deep-fried foods and other items -- and by approving bioengineered high-starch potatoes, which, when fried, absorb little oil -- we could have our favorite foods and eat them, too.

In other words, we could have fewer calories and less regulation.

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