DECEPTIVE PRACTICES UNDERMINE CREDIBILITY OF CONSUMER GROUP

By ACSH Staff — June 22, 1998

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The American Council on Science and Health (ACSH) has been monitoring the activities of The Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI). After a lengthy investigation of CSPI's activities, we have come to some very grave conclusions about this group, which is regularly trusted by Americans as a source of information about food safety. Our findings reveal that CSPI is knowingly engaging in deceptive practices as they attempt to persuade the public and the media that their food safety scares are legitimate.

Below, you will find a description of the facts that were uncovered during our investigation.

Rosie O'Donnell

* Prior to November 97: Frito Lay informally approaches talk show hostess Rosie O'Donnell to be the spokesperson for Wow! chips made with Olestra. She chooses not to accept the offer.

* Nov. 18, 97: CSPI applauds Ms. O'Donnell for putting the health of her audience first by rejecting the endorsement. CSPI's press release goes on to allege that Olestra is dangerous.

* Nov. 25, 97: O'Donnell agent Risa Shapiro flatly denies CSPI's claim that O'Donnell turned down the offer because of any concern about Olestra's safety. She was simply too busy, said Rosie's agent.

* Nov. 28, 97: CSPI director Dr. Michael Jacobson admits to the New York Post of having no proof of his allegation that Rosie opposed Olestra (See article41.

* Nov. 29, 97: CSPI fails to amend, correct, or remove the discredited press release from their regularly updated press release section of their web page (www.cspinet.org [1]), even after having been exposed.

* As of June 17, 1998 (more than 6 months after this publicity stunt was exposed as illegitimate), the press release remains unaltered and uncorrected on CSPI's regularly updated web page, deceiving its thousands of worldwide visitors who haven't read the November 28th New York Post.

Efforts to Convince People that Olestra Causes Gastrointestinal (GI) Problems
* CSPI promotes jokes about Olestra on their web page. Jokes have their place in society but not as a means of promoting scientific truths. By promoting such jokes on their webpage, CSPI is engaging in a clever scheme to spread their opinion that Olestra causes GI problems.

* CSPI has run advertisements in the media which encourage people to associate GI problems they may experience with consumption of Olestra.

Unkept Promise to Submit Olestra Report Forms

* On their web page, CSPI promised to forward each consumer experience questionnaire (Olestra snack attack) to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

* An ACSH staffer submitted a completed report form to the CSPI web page. In this form he described that he enjoyed the choices Olestra brought to his diet and that he experienced no GI problems from consuming Olestra.

* In response to an ACSH F.O.I. request, Mary Ditto, an F.D.A. official, informed ACSH that as of June 15, 1998 (the date of the Food Advisory Committee hearing), CSPI had not submitted the online questionnaires (as they promised they would), including the one filled out by the ACSH staffer.

Unscientific Methodology of Olestra Questionnaire

* CSPI's internet consumer experience survey, Olestra snack attack, fails to provide balanced answer choices. The survey lists a mild problem as one that does not interfere with a person's normal daily activities, i.e. vomiting and diarrhea.

* The questionnaire also fails to provide a response option for anyone who did not have problems with Olestra. The only choices are mild, moderate and severe.

* This report form is a textbook example of how not to elicit valid and honest results.

CONCLUSION

According to ACSH Associate Director, Jeff Stier, If CSPI's efforts were an elementary school science project, young Dr. Jacobson would have recieved an F and would have found himself in the principal's office for cheating.