
Agriculture, Food and Health: The Problem and the Solution

Q&A

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Mark McLellan: If you were the secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, what is the one thing you would have happen, starting tomorrow? Michael?

Michael Jacobson: One specific thing is to set limits on salt. That would have the single greatest health benefit.

Clare Hasler-Lewis: I would make vegetables very cheap and junk food very expensive. When you can buy a triple burger for ninety-nine cents, there's something wrong with the food paradigm in this country.

Carl Keen: Augment the NIH budget and ask for some studies to be done, because, for the most part, we have thoughts, we don't have information.

McLellan: Let's go to the audience for questions.

Kathleen Nolan (UC Cooperative Extension, Monterey County): Dr. Keen, please comment on whether a virus or other microorganism may influence maintenance of an individual's weight.

Keen: There are good data from experimental animals, mainly chickens, that some viruses can cause significant increases in fat mass. Rick Atkinson, who used to be at UC-Davis, was one who isolated viruses from obese humans and obese monkeys. Cross injection studies looked promising. Workers at the Pennington continue to pursue this. Some believe that it's silly. On the other hand, the idea that a virus or a specific bacterium can cause some sorts of disease states is now well established. Ulcers provide an excellent example. It's provocative, but it's receiving a lot of scientific interest.

Tom Tomich (University of California, Davis): Everyone rightly raised the issue of the health crisis here in the United States. Carl stated that the evidence is thin that consumption of fruits and vegetables is linked to heart disease. Scientific evidence is surprisingly thin regarding many of the important causal relationships between food and health outcomes. Carl just made the predictable call for more research, but my question is a little different. I wonder if we are framing the questions in the right way. As an economist, I worry a lot about the right unit of analysis. We use the phrase “health-promoting foods,” but I could say “health-promoting diets,” “health-promoting communities,” or I could say, “health-promoting society.” My question is—and I hope that clear compelling messages about priorities for work will come out of this meeting—what’s the right balance? I suspect it’s probably “and” rather than “or,” across those, but how do we get that right? I hear us talking a lot about foods, but is that the right unit?

Keen: I agree with you. But the thing that’s very impressive is that the proof is in the vegetable–fruit literature, although it’s not as robust as many think it is. If multiple factors in fruits and vegetables are driving it, not all fruits and vegetables are the same. The real issue is not to show that something is not a good fruit or a good vegetable, but if we take our blinders off and say, “Can we identify the family of nutrients that, in orchestration, are actually giving beneficial effects, and start finding out how to increase them in the diet?” The tricky part here is that most people are uncomfortable with the concept that one fruit is better than another or one vegetable is better than another, and we must get that out of our minds if we are to make big changes.

Jacobson: You’re right when you say, “Let’s look at a higher level.” There is pretty clear evidence that certain diets are much better than others, in terms of health standards. [Audio lost.] A virus may contribute to obesity, as may BPA and *trans* fats, but my hunch is that these are pimples on an elephant in comparison with a twenty percent increase in calories available, which is a huge thing that dwarfs these laboratory curiosities.

Hasler-Lewis: We mustn’t ignore energy expenditure, which is a large part of the problem. Michael said something that Steve Cooper stated a number of years ago: “We’ve engineered activity out of daily life.” We need to educate people, not to spend an hour and a half in the gym, but to walk more, which could burn up twenty percent more calories.

Jacobson: The secretary of Health and Human Services stated the need for taking ten thousand steps per day. That’s difficult; about five miles. It’s not just leaving your car a little further out in the parking lot.

Audience Member: My questions are for Michael. The organic segment of the food industry markets its products as “safer,” “healthier,” “tastier” and “better for the environment.” Since CSPI has a record of going after false assertions, and it’s become clear over the last few years from meta-analysis that none of these claims holds up, will CSPI go after these claims?

Jacobson: If you see clear-cut, dishonest, claims that violate the law—made by large companies—send them to me. We don't play favorites. My organization, for instance, has been supportive of agricultural biotechnology, unlike most consumer and environmental groups. We work with facts, and, if we see dishonesty, we may go after it.

Audience Member: Thank you for that. My second question: Regarding your "suitable substitute" statement about *trans* fats, I am wondering if CSPI is planning to make a public statement in favor of transgenic oilseed crops that allow increased oleic acid replacement of *trans* fats.

Jacobson: We haven't commented on that particular type of seed, but we have been supportive of agricultural biotechnology. This is the second time I have spoken at an NABC conference. Ralph Hardy knows full well that we have been supportive of agbiotech. When it comes to particular seed, I don't know how necessary it may be.

Ken Swartzel (North Carolina State University): David Kessler has suggested that we need to control our own diets.¹ On the other hand, Michael suggests that the government regulations are needed, that people can't do it themselves. The *trans*-fat issue is an example. The late Peter Jennings presented a documentary titled, "How to Get Fat Without Really Trying," the point of which was simply that, on one hand we have a food pyramid and on the other hand we have government subsidies, which don't line up. We should eat more of certain foods and less of others, and most of the government subsidies go to foods we should be eating less of. Fruits and vegetables get practically no government subsidies. Clare, regarding your one issue of cheap fruits and vegetables and expensive burgers—government subsidies are controlling this.

Hasler-Lewis: That's a great point. And there should be categories for people who are given food stamps, and they should not be able to exchange food stamps for items that are not healthful. That would be an edgy move, begging the question of how much we want government involved in our lives. It's a controversial issue.

McLellan: We are the government and we are here to tell you what to eat! Michael?

Jacobson: I think you got David Kessler's book exactly wrong. His main point was how industry is engineering foods to make them virtually addictive, through smart, tested combinations of sugar, fat and salt. He didn't give a good prescription of what to do about it, because it's hard to imagine companies not trying to make their foods as tasty as possible. On the subsidy issue, there are misconceptions. The ag economists that I am familiar with have said that the subsidies to corn growers have negligible effects on the prices of

¹Kessler D (2009) *The End of Overeating: Taking Control of the Insatiable American Appetite*. Emmaus, PA: Rodale Books.

corn, corn syrup and soft drinks. The reason for inexpensive food in general in the United States—corn, soybean, and even fruits and vegetables—is successful agricultural research. To make food more expensive, we would have to stop funding ag research. Regarding government mandates on one hand and functional foods on the other to prevent colon cancer through vitamin D, *etc.*, in reality it's not a case of either-or. Big forces are in play. There needs to be judicious involvement, not suicidal involvement. Industry needs to do what it can do. Take salt as an example. A level playing field put out by government can be extremely helpful. Company A is unlikely to lower its sodium content since its foods would not taste as good as Company B's, unless government dictates that everyone has to meet a certain limit, although sometimes companies do the right thing on their own. And I believe that government is subsidizing the fruit and vegetable industries with the food stamp, school-lunch and WIC programs. Direct subsidies have screwed up the corn and soybean industries. If subsidies of the fruit and vegetable industries are necessary, they should be applied smartly so that more fruits and vegetables are consumed. Clearly, individuals have a role. We need to control our impulses, in large and small ways. If you have good, healthy foods around your house, you will probably eat them. If you have junk foods around the house, you'll eat those first. So we all need to contribute at different levels. It's not all government; it's not all industry; it's not all consumers.

Barbara Schneeman (Food and Drug Administration): A recently published article stated that claims on food packages are simply marketing, creating the notion that we can somehow eat our way out of a chronic disease problem or eat our way out of obesity. You were talking about the idea of funding more research and being able to make more of those kinds of claims. But are such claims useful?

Hasler-Lewis: The issue of claims has been interesting to me for a long time. The good side is if it does what it's intended to do: educate consumers at the point of purchase, such as choosing cholesterol-lowering Cheerios. I am a firm believer in information being available to people who choose to use it, provided that it's based on science.