

A Responsible Choice

By Radhia Gleis, PhD., C.C.N.

On May 20, 2002, the New York Times, front-page headlines: “In Bid to Improve Nutrition, Schools Expel Soda and Chips”. The article talks about the Obesity Prevention and Treatment Act, taken up by Congress that week, that would start a campaign to improve the eating habits in the nation. It goes on to say:

The two biggest states, Texas and California are moving to phasing out junk food in schools, as are many school districts in other states.

The food industry and its lobbyists have started fighting back, running radio advertisements that criticize “food Nags” as trying to take away choice. Sloth not junk food is behind the threefold increase in the number of overweight children in the last 30 years, say spokesmen for some of the biggest food and soft drink companies.

John Doyle, a spokesman for the Center for Consumer Freedom, the food industry group leading the fight against the lawsuits and the bans on junk food, states: “you can not mandate fat away”. That may be true but it provides a platform for this urgent and critical topic to be discussed and acted upon.

The money that schools earn from contracts with Coca-Cola or McDonald's exceeds what they could make on their own, and to completely terminate those contracts would be difficult. Leaving the choice entirely to consumers has proved ineffective. When a working mother or father considers dinner, time and money limit healthy options.

With many U.S. school districts facing budget squeezes, a quick solution has come from offering more profitable fast food from outlets like McDonald's, KFC and Pizza Hut.

Remember when the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) declared ketchup a vegetable in 1986 and caused a huge uproar? Although ketchup eventually lost its vegetable designation, the USDA now sanctions commercially prepared salsa as a vegetable. The condiment figures prominently on school cafeteria menus, along with pepperoni pizza, submarine sandwiches and French fries.

Alarming statistics about children's health are being revealed almost daily:

- In the past 25 years, the percentage of overweight children ages 6 to 11 has nearly doubled from 7% to 13%.
- U.S. spending on hospital costs related to childhood obesity has tripled in the past two decades
- Type II (adult onset) diabetes, which used to affect mostly adults, is now appearing at an increasing rate in children.
- Obesity across all age levels has reached epidemic levels. According to a recent Surgeon General's report, half of all Americans are overweight. Obesity is associated with hypertension, gall bladder disease and diabetes.

Fat-laden offerings in school cafeterias are not the only problem. In this era of declining school budgets, schools are supplementing their incomes by allowing candy and soda machines on campuses. Overall, vending machine sales nationwide account for \$750 million annually in extra money for schools. One school district in Arizona expects to gain \$2.2 million over five years from soda and candy sales.

These sales aggravate the child health problem. A study by Children's Hospital in Boston shows that drinking one can of soda a day increases a child's risk of obesity by about 50%. To add fuel to the fire, children are bombarded with advertisements for soda, fast foods and sugar-coated cereals when they watch television.

Ironically, at the same time that children are sipping Cokes and eating Milky Ways, more and more schools are being forced to trim physical education programs due to budget cuts and the increased emphasis on academics in order to prepare students for standardized tests.

- **American School Food Service Association** estimates that about 13% of nation's 86,000 public schools now sell fast foodWSJ, 9/15/97
- Some items don't meet **USDA** nutrition standards and thus aren't eligible for reimbursement under the federal school-lunch program.

We as a nation need to become more informed about our diet and the foods we allow our children to eat. It's not a matter of choice it's a matter of responsibility. We have too much faith in the decisions of our school systems. As the article points out: the food industry is joined by school administrators, who depend on income from the sale of snack food. "Nationwide, schools get \$750 million a year from companies that sell snack and processed foods in schools".

For more facts about soft drinks and other junk food health hazards look for part 2 of this article in the August issue. Or visit me at my website www.advancedhealthinstitute.com.

Talk about choice? By the mere definition of the word, in order to make a choice, you need at least two options. And to make a conscientious choice you should have full disclosure and complete information as to the consequences of those options. If you have little or no information about the potential dangers of the wrong choice what good would the choice be? Sometimes, we as a society don't always make the right choice. In order to protect the rights of free enterprise we very often make serious compromises.

Before we continue to make bad choices in order to serve the few at the cost of the many children who do not yet know the consequences of their actions; let's look at just a few of the facts the junk food pushers don't want you to know.

In 1970, intake of refined sweeteners equaled approximately 24 pounds per capita per year in the US. Today's average equals 158 pounds per capita per year. Average annual consumption of soda equals 54 gallons per person. A 12 ounce can of soda pop has 8 teaspoons of sugar, a Big Gulp has 64 ounces of soda with approximately 43 teaspoons of sugar per cup. One third of the sugar consumed in this country is in the form of soda pop.

There are so many important facts on this subject that I will have to write about them in two parts but for now let's just look at soft drinks.

Soft drinks steal water from the body. They work very much like a diuretic, which takes away more water than it provides. Just to process the high levels of sugar in soft drinks steals a considerable amount of water from the body. Soft Drinks never quench your thirst, certainly not your body's need for water. Imagine if you gave your houseplant nothing but soda pop instead of water. How long do think it would last? Constantly denying your body an adequate amount of water can lead to chronic cellular dehydration, a condition that weakens your body at the cellular level. This, in turn, can lead to a weakened immune system and a plethora of diseases.

The elevated levels of phosphates in soft drinks leach vital minerals from your body. A severe lack of minerals can lead to Heart Disease (lack of magnesium), Osteoporosis (lack of calcium) and many other diseases.

Most soft drinks contain caffeine. Caffeine severely interferes with digestion and blood sugar regulation. Caffeine stimulates the adrenal glands to produce epinephrine (adrenaline). Taking size into account, the impact on a 7-year-old child of 3 cans of regular cola is that of 8 cups of coffee on an adult. Epinephrine and high amounts of sugar, in turn, stimulates the pancreas to secrete insulin, thus lowering blood sugar levels. The high amounts of sugar in soft drinks that cause your pancreas to produce an abundance of insulin leads to a "sugar crash." Chronic elevation and depletion of sugar and insulin can lead to diabetes, obesity, cardiovascular disease and other imbalance related diseases.

Dr. Wilma Friere of the World Health Organization, WHO states: "Twenty to 30 percent of school children are overweight and obese," Friere goes on to say: at least one cause of chubby children is "the amount of hours that they spend at home watching television." This is the argument that the spokesman for the food and soft drink companies are claiming is the real cause of juvenile obesity and not the food they eat.

However, a study from the School of Nutrition, Science and Policy at Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts, found that children whose families routinely watched television at mealtime ate more salty snacks and sodas and fewer fruits and vegetables than those who turned the TV off while eating. The Tufts study suggests that advertising and programming provide unrealistic ideas about normal diet. Parental education also is a factor, says Dr. Michael Rich of the Harvard Medical School and Dr. Miriam Bar of Loyola University.

All of these are important factors. But we must be careful not to blame the sedentary lifestyle or advertisement hype while dismissing the obvious fact that our children and most adults in America today are still eating an unhealthy amount of junk food, processed, high fat, high sugar foods.

Years ago I stopped working with children in my practice. The battle became just too difficult and heart breaking. When I worked with children I realized that I was not just working with an individual who can make their own decisions and choices. I found myself competing with parents, siblings, peers and school systems. When I wanted to change the child's diet, most of the time, both the child and the parent said that their

school does not allow the students to bring their own food. In many cases they could not bring bottled water to school; and they needed a doctor's prescription for dietary supplements.

Children are highly influenced by their parents. There are many reasons why parents have limited alternatives to feeding their kids. Time and money are the biggest reasons. Today, both parents often have overwhelmingly busy schedules. Spending the time and expense to buy and prepare three healthy, nutritious meals a day is hard pressed to compete with a "happy meal" on the way home or a large pizza delivered right to your door. Lack of nutrition education, finicky eaters or just being short of creative ideas can be a tremendous dietary challenge to most parents.

Even the most conscientious parent has to compete with incomplicant family members and siblings. Peer pressure is always a major influential factor on children. If the village isn't doing it it's pretty hard to expect your children to go against the social norm. All of these factors account for the enormous challenge our society has to eat and feed our children a healthy diet.

So what is the answer? I feel education and a community effort to change is the only answer. In our economically dominated society money usually takes president. As in most big business, the food and soft drink industry is interested in one thing, profit. We have seen time and time again how profit motivation can lead to severe consequences. However, we, the consumer dictate what the industries will provide. If we don't buy it they will change what they sell. If we demand it, the food industry will find a way of making it less expensive and more convenient without compromising our health.

It is important to encourage our schools to find other means of revenue, other than conceding to junk food vendors. We must also support better nutritional education in both our primary and secondary grade schools, as well as our colleges. It has been my experience that most of the nutritional education offered to even our medical professionals has been appalling and inadequate. Once again, this is an example of how money dictates availability. Money goes to things that will make more money. You cannot place a patent on food; therefore, there is little or no profit in research. Even though nutrition is primal in origin it is relatively a new science.

We are just now coming around to the greater understanding of how what we eat will determine the quality of our life and health. The fact that even that statement is still controversial is a mystery to me. Never the less truth shall eventually prevail. The more educated we become on the care and feeding of the human body the sooner we will make greater strides in our health and overall well being. Our future, our children and our planet are in our hands. When we compromise our health for profit and convenience we compromise our very existence.

As a clinical nutritionist and educator it is my job to assist you in making the right nutritional choices for you and your family. You can find out more about our clinic and

our services by contacting the Center for Natural Health, at www.center4naturalhelath.com or calling our office at (512) 416-1810.

Radhia Gleis is a Certified Clinical Nutritionist and a holistic practitioner, CCN. She is also a Certified Bio-Nutritional Analyst. She has a PhD in Pastoral Counseling and a MEd. in Nutrition. She is a professional member of the International Association of Clinical Nutritionists (I.A.A.C.N.). She is the president of Advanced Health Institute. She specializes in metabolic testing and rebalancing. For more information see our website at www.advancedhealthinstitute.com or call (512) 416-1810.