

# Can Industry Afford A Healthy America?

By Joan Gussow

(Dr. Gussow is president-elect of the Society for Nutrition Education. The following is adapted from a speech to the American Association for the Advancement of Science annual meeting in Houston.)

Many of us who are nutrition educators are feeling a certain sense of uneasiness about society's sudden interest in whether we can do much about either the nutritional ignorance or the nutritional status of the citizens of the U. S.

It is always nice to be asked. It is somewhat less flattering to be asked--as educators so often are--to create the appearance of an attack on a major social problem that society has in all other ways failed to address.

Many of us feel some doubt about just what it is society wants us to do. We are faced with a radically changed and rapidly changing food supply. The product population explosion in the supermarket has taken us in 50 years from about 800 to about 10,000 items, a significant percentage of them consumables against whose consumption most responsible nutritionists would urgently advise. It is now possible--to pick but a few recent examples--to buy chocolate-chip-cookie shaped breakfast cereal, fruit juiceless breakfast drink mixes, synthetic whipped cream, and hamburger sauce to make your homemade burger taste commercial.

The question is, what do the citizens of this supposedly advanced civilization--which is by at least one calculation still the second richest country on earth--what is it they want nutrition educators to do about all this? Do they really want us to work to help them have healthy diets? Do they really want a more rational national food supply?

Personally, I am tired of being called self-righteous, of being scolded for telling other people how to eat, of being blamed for trying to keep people from enjoying themselves. What would Americans like us

to do for them? Do they want us to get these silly products off the shelves? Do they want us to tell them what not to buy? Do they want us to work toward closing every other fast food joint, or declaring them off limits to minors? Do they want us to teach their children not to eat the way they do?

One reason I ask these questions is because I know what the people who provide these products and services--the food manufacturers--would like us to do. They would like us to do what they call nutrition education.

Recently I had occasion to read the statements of several food industry executives testifying before the House Nutrition Subcommittee. Almost without exception these industry representatives were enthusiastically supportive of consumer nutrition education. They spoke out strongly for the consumer's right to be provided with accurate nutrition information; just as long as the consumer's free choice in a free marketplace was not tampered with--and as long as no one told the consumer what to eat.

As the U.S. food industry apparently sees it, then, the role of those of us who are nutrition educators is to provide consumers with "accurate" information about vitamins and minerals, fats, carbohydrates and proteins; with data about human nutrient requirements, and with some tables of food composition. Using these (and helped by complex nutrient labels) the average consumer will presumably match up the numbers and decide for herself how to select a series of healthful, tasty meals.

### Sensual Appeals

There is, of course, not the remotest possibility that the average consumer--a category that includes children, illiterates, those unable to do quadratic equations and so on--can or will do this, or that this sort of nutrition education will produce dietary change; and one can only assume that the food industry, which relies heavily on sensual and emotional appeals in selling its message, knows that.

Now let me engage for a moment in a brief digression about what distinguishes nutrition education today from nutrition education in the past. If you look at the history of nutrition education in this country you will be struck by the fact that it began with coaxing children to eat more food. In a time when the country was considerably less affluent--or overfed--than it is now, nutrition education consisted of preaching the values of foods such as milk or green vegetables so as to induce poor families to add them to their children's diets. The children's increased height and weight gain were indicators that the program had succeeded--and highly reinforcing to both the parents and the educators.

Today--with obesity one of our major nutritional problems--we are clearly faced with an entirely



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different situation. Today we have products that actively compete with milk for a place in the diets of the poor (both here and in the developing countries). Today our major nutrition problems appear to relate to foods people ought to eat less of. In fact, the U.S. Dietary Goals are to a very large extent a series of reductive statements. Eat fewer calories, they say, eat less fat, less cholesterol, less sugar, less refined carbohydrate, less salt, less fatty meat, and so on. In short, much of nutrition education in this country in the last quarter of the 20th Century is education in self-restraint.

Yet any educator who promotes self-restraint these days, who urges you to "eat less" or to "cut down" (on those before-dinner drinks or after-dinner desserts) is battling against a well-financed thrust toward self-indulgence in which the prospective educatee is incessantly urged to give in to herself, to be good to herself, to join the Pepsi Generation, to become an over-doer so that she can find fast, fast, fast relief from her dietary indiscretions in a soothing glass of carbonation.

#### Self-Restraint

There is a great difference in your likelihood of success if you are telling people--as nutrition educators used to do--to add something to what they are eating, as opposed to telling them to give up something they like. Nutrition education today must overcome a psychological and cultural press toward self-indulgence and loss of self-control. And any nutrition educator must come to terms with the fact that supporting that thrust toward dietary indulgence there is--like the machinery behind the Wizard of Oz--the financial interest of the single largest industry in the United States.

I want to go back to my earlier assertion that nutrient information will not improve food habits. Educators invented the truism that information is not education, but we sometimes fail to act on it. If the goal of nutrition education is, as we educators would like it to be, improved dietary habits, we must keep insisting that provision of nutrition information (or even food information) per se is not, has not been, and is unlikely ever to be, very effective in achieving that goal.

Therefore, if various sectors of the food industry want us to confine ourselves to providing nutrient information, we are forced to assume that perhaps everyone does not want nutrition educators to change behavior. Or, as economist Peter Timmer recently observed, "If nutrition education were successful, the support for it would be much less universal."

The simple fact is that any company's ultimate goal is--has to be--to sell products. No food company can afford to do anything that, in the long run, threatens that bottom line. On the other hand, the nutrition educator's ultimate goal is--or ought to

be--to promote good food practices--to teach people how to get the best diet possible at the lowest possible cost, within the constraints of that person's lifestyle. These goals--that of the producer and that of the educator--are often very incompatible; since, as I suggested earlier, much of what educators ought probably to be teaching is reduced consumption of the very products from which the producers make the greatest profit. I suspect that the economics of the situation could be manipulated so that it would pay food companies to promote sensible eating, but at the moment the economics almost always work the other way. No food company can afford to urge people to eat less of what it produces, however much nutritional sense such advice might make--a fact that usually puts the food companies at basic odds with nutrition educators.

Thus nutrition education, effective nutrition education, is neither an economically nor a politically neutral activity. In trying to understand what we are up against, I have asked myself what it is that makes teaching eating so different from teaching reading. Little children have early exposure to both print and food, yet two facts seem unavoidably evident. The first is that nobody's ox will be gored if children learn to read, but many people's oxen will be gored if children learn to eat a good diet.

#### Let the Schools Do It

The second fact is a corollary to the first. There is is very little overt anti-reading propaganda against which a reading teacher need fight. The TV set is always out there, of course, raising implicit questions about whether one needs to read at all. But no one actively promotes the pleasures of being a bad reader. The same cannot be said of teaching eating. Someone is out there promoting the joys of eating a bad diet. If you doubt it, watch children's television for a single Saturday morning. The message may be merely implicit, but it is unmistakable.

So while Congress last year appropriated 50 cents per school child to do universal nutrition education in the schools, I am far from sanguine about the results that investment may produce. For the schools cannot reform society, as Henry Steele Commager has pointed out; even though we always tend to turn over to educators problems we are not otherwise dealing with; using the schools as our surrogate conscience. Is society prejudiced? Is there economic and racial inequity? Let the schools make everyone equal. Have we created an impulse-dominated society which celebrates "the world's first broad-based hedonism?" Let the schools teach our children discipline and self-restraint. Have we allowed food manufacturers and advertising specialists to teach our children what to eat? Let the schools do nutrition education. That way there is very little likelihood that we shall have broad based dietary change.

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I spoke earlier about nutrition educators being asked to provide the appearance of an attack on what was a serious social problem. The serious social problem is that we have not yet worked out a way to have simultaneously both a physically healthy populace and an economically healthy food industry. For much of the profit of the food industry--as I earlier suggested--comes from the sale of complex, highly processed foods of questionable nutritional worth, the products of ceaseless innovation designed to extract higher prices and/or higher profits from the 1500 or so pounds of food which are all the average American can consume in a year.

It has long been clear that if ordinary citizens began to listen to nutrition educators and turned to eating relatively simple, minimally processed, low-calorie diets, part of the food industry would be in serious financial trouble. These economic realities are a problem worth worrying over. We all need to be concerned--if people start to eat less beef and sugar and Pringles--about the cattle growers, the cane raisers and the Pringle makers.

#### Nutritional Minefield

At the same time we must be aware that in allowing free rein to product innovation and self-serving promotion disguised as education, we have created a food and information marketplace that is a nightmare to an educator and a minefield for the consumer. The U. S. marketplace, as I mentioned earlier, now contains something on the order of 10,000 food items. A consumer selecting randomly--on the basis of some appealing but non-nutritive characteristic like palatability or even on the basis of nutrient labeling--would very likely end up with an assortment of overprocessed, high-fat, high-sugar, high-salt food items of a kind widely recognized to be components of an unhealthy diet.

Even the most skilled educators find it daunting to teach consumers how to make informed food selections from such an astonishing array of products. Nor are the food choices available outside the supermarket--to those who patronize restaurants, vending machines or other suppliers of standardized food objects--nutritionally desirable alternatives. We have, in fact, created a food supply from which it is extremely difficult for many people not to choose a poor diet.

What can be done about this dilemma? It seems clear, as a beginning, that we must demand that our economists tell us how to make our system produce both health and economic well-being, instead of producing what economist Herman Daly has called "existential scarcity"--a "shortage of what ever does in fact make people whole, well, and happy." Second, I think we must resist to the death any notion that the proper role of nutrition educators is to teach nutrients and their relation to health, letting people figure out for themselves what kinds

of foods to eat. And, finally, I think we must admit to ourselves that the major tool we have been using to simplify "nutrients" for the public has terrible flaws in today's marketplace.

It is a fact that we have long operated on the merciful assumption that most people--including most nutrition professionals--did not wish to calculate their intakes of 45 or 50 nutrients each time they selected a meal. As a consequence, we have developed various eating guides, the most recent of which contains four food groups. What I think has only recently become clear--partly because of the extraordinary furor over the Dietary Goals--is that one reason we and the food industry have lived so long and happily together with the four food groups is that it is a vague enough classification to be able to tolerate all kinds of food horrors. Purple breakfast confections with magenta marshmallows are taken in as part of the grain-cereal group, for example, and Hi-C Dairy Fresh Red Punch--containing little or no fruit juice--can masquerade as part of the fruit and vegetable group. The Basic Four, in short, turns out to be totally indiscriminating in a world of fantasy foods--hence, no one's ox gets gored.

It is important that we take seriously the economic problems of the affected producer groups, but we

#### Infant Formula Bill

Reps. Ron Dellums and George Miller, both California Democrats, last month introduced legislation (H. R. 4093) aimed at controlling the promotion and marketing of infant formula in Third World countries. International nutritionists have found that infant formula is hazardous in areas of the world characterized by low incomes, poor water, widespread illiteracy and lack of refrigeration (see CNI Vol. IX:6).

The Infant Nutrition Act of 1979 would restrain marketing and promotion in two ways. First, U. S.-based companies wishing to sell formula in any developing country would be required to apply for a license and would have to submit a marketing plan identifying prospective customers. Second, the bill would prohibit all promotion of infant formula in developing countries, including both mass-media advertising to consumers and promotion through health professionals.

In addition, the bill would require that product labels contain proper instructions for safe use printed in the indigenous language of the developing country. Labels would also have to affirm the merits of breast feeding.

must also recognize that consumers need help choosing foods, and there is no way we can help them select better diets without causing economic disruption to some sectors of the food industry. (I think, by the way, that people need a new teaching tool, and persons both in and out of government are even now working to develop one, taking into account some of the recommendations of the Dietary Goals.)

Finally, I think we must all recognize that, in the long run, we cannot out-shout the food supply. Therefore, if we as a society wish ourselves and our children to eat better diets, we are going to have to agree that one of the jobs of nutrition educators is to help change the environments in which people encounter food, and to change the quality of the food they encounter.

## Senate Nears Decision On Food Aid Reform Bill

The Senate is expected to consider a package of reforms for the Food for Peace program when it takes up a foreign aid bill (S. 588) later this month.

The Senate was scheduled to consider the bill this week, but Senator Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) succeeded in delaying action on the measure because of provisions affecting Rhodesia. Debate now seems likely during the week of June 18.

The reforms--most of which are supported by the two major world hunger lobbies, Bread for the World and the Interreligious Task Force on U. S. Food Policy--were embodied in a compromise bill (S. 1174) introduced last month by Senator Richard Stone (D-Florida) and subsequently approved by the Senate Agriculture Committee. Stone plans to introduce the bill as a Committee amendment to the foreign aid bill when it reaches the Senate floor.

"The new bill... needs to be strengthened by adding a requirement that food aid be provided only where there is a demonstrated need," Bread for the World commented in its newsletter, which also urged members to contact Senators in a show of support for the measure.

House action on food aid reform has been suspended pending the outcome on the Senate side. In March Rep. Stephen Solarz (D-N. Y.) introduced the "Self-Reliant Development and International Food Assistance Reform Act of 1979," which reflects the policy analysis of Bread for the World and is supported by the Taskforce and by New Directions, a relatively new foreign policy lobby. A similar bill with the same title was introduced in April by Senators Bob Dole (R-Kansas), George S. McGovern (D-S. D.) and John Melcher (D-Montana) and became the basis for the current Senate bill.

The Solarz bill consists of five major sections amending P. L. 480, which is the authorizing legislation for the Food for Peace program. These amendments would:

- ⑤ Require Presidential determination, based on detailed country assessments, that food aid is legitimately needed for humanitarian and development purposes in each recipient country, and that such aid will effectively aid the poor.
- ⑥ Provide continuity of supply of P. L. 480 commodities, in time of inadequate crop supplies, for developmental purposes. Presently, with exceptions only for "urgent humanitarian purposes," available supplies of any commodity must be used first to meet domestic requirements, assure adequate carryover, and cover anticipated exports for dollars before what is left over can be made available for PL 480.
- ⑦ Apply debt-forgiveness provisions of Food for Development (Title III) not only to revenues generated by the sale of the commodities but also to the value of the food that is used directly in projects that benefit the very poor.
- ⑧ Guard against shipping grant (Title II) food aid in emergency situations when it would be a disincentive to local farmers in recipient countries.
- ⑨ Give a broader role to indigenous institutions and workers taking part in grant (Title II) programs.

The final three sections of the Solarz bill were included with slight modifications in a development aid authorization bill (H. R. 3324) that passed the House on April 10. The remaining sections, which would have required consent of the Agriculture Committee, were excluded so that the entire bill would not have to be referred to that panel.

In a related development, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee cut more than 10 percent (\$212 million) from President Carter's request for international development assistance funds in the foreign aid authorization bill. "If further cuts are allowed on the Senate floor or in the appropriations bills, next year's aid funding could end up substantially below current levels," said Bread for the World.

World hunger advocates are also concerned about the Food Security Bill of 1979 introduced in April by Reps. Matthew McHugh (D-N. Y.) and Benjamin A. Gilman (R-N. Y.). The bill (H. R. 3611/2) would establish a four million ton wheat reserve for use in the event of a world food shortage. The measure has 56 co-sponsors but needs more to improve the chances of hearings this summer.