

Stealth Health: A Modest Proposal for a Healthier National Diet ***by Hank Cardello***

In the past several months there has been a spirited outcry by various concerned entities about the ever-widening girths of Americans. The obesity crisis, as it's been rightfully called, leads to a myriad number of serious health problems, including diabetes and heart disease. Our collective food consumption has caused an epidemic. The cost of this in terms of human life and its impact on the health care system is perhaps incalculable. But we can assume it's going to be expensive.

There's a lot of blame going around, and most of the finger-pointing is in the right direction. We don't diet. We don't exercise. We ignore nutrition advice. We ignore government health initiatives. Remember the President's Council on Physical Fitness? Public schools have curtailed their gym programs. Some of us give up. Some of us are even genetically disposed to grow fat.

The various solutions proposed are noteworthy for their ambition. Banning dangerous trans fats from restaurants. Sin taxes on junk food and sugared beverages. Eliminating soft drinks from school vending machines. Reinstating physical education programs in public schools. Beefing down the menus in schools.

So far, nothing has worked.

Why is this so?

The debate centers around two extremes. On the one hand, well intentioned "Food Police" look to extract concessions from food companies without considering the financial impact or practicality of such changes. Foods are either "good" or "bad," with scorn reserved for our most favorite delights – French fries, hamburgers, fried chicken, ice cream, sugared soft drinks. Even efforts by the food industry to make positive changes are acknowledged with minimal applause. Their point of view comes across like a diatribe against capitalism, expecting the government to play the role of nanny to its consumer children.

The food industry lobby, especially the restaurant trade, takes an opposing, yet equally intractable position. It insists that the consumer is solely responsible for his/her eating behavior, and that plenty of healthy options are provided for their patrons to choose from.

Now that we are facing skyrocketing rates of childhood obesity, the downsides of excessive portion sizes, and the evils of trans fats, do purveyors of blatantly unhealthy foods and beverages not fully understand that they unintentionally may be killing off their "heavy" users? Even if a corporation does not choose to market healthier food because it is the right thing to do, they should at least make changes because they make economic sense. Repeat business is a prized factor for any successful brand. If your user has a curtailed life expectancy by eating unhealthy products, both the user and the business lose.

Adding salads to menus is a good thing, but does anyone really believe this will alter the eating habits of the frequent burger and fries consumer? It's not about providing a healthier *alternative*, it's about improving

the foods we love and will continue to eat. Fried chicken without the cholesterol? Hot dogs good for your heart? French fries and doughnuts that absorb less calories from cooking oils? Yes! Eating more granola won't help America's hearts beat longer. We must learn to live with and adopt the oxymoron of healthier junk food.

Because most consumers have not demonstrated the ability to control the quantity of foods and beverages they ingest, it is my belief that there is only one solution: Stealth Health.

What do I mean by Stealth Health? Due to developments in how to reduce calories, increasing satiety and other emerging technologies that seamlessly incorporate beneficial nutrients into foods and beverages, the food industry can now access tools to deliver great tasting products with healthier nutrition profiles. And they can do this tomorrow without ever trumpeting the health message. This can all be done at a profit without losing... in fact, possibly gaining... users for their products.

This provides the basis for a new food paradigm. Because taste is considered the #1 reason people select foods and beverages, health has always taken a back seat. Residual trepidation over failed attempts at introducing healthier fare – such as McDonald's McLean Deluxe hamburger – still influences the industry's unwillingness to take chances. But times are different. Obesity wasn't a problem when the first McDonald's was opened. Now it's time for a change. Healthier foods must become the minimum ante. They become the speed bumps preventing us from premature heart attacks and early-onset diabetes. They just become the norm. Just like your car comes with seat belts and airbags, their cost-benefits now are taken for granted.

We need a call to action to engage the food purveyors in improving the overall health of what we consume on a daily basis. Not because they are to blame for the crisis, but because they are the only ones who can effectively deal with it. They're our last best hope. Just this fall, senior executives from several major food corporations, including General Mills, Coca-Cola and Nestle, participated at the 2nd annual Global Obesity Business Forum convened at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. The goal was to get the academics, scientists, manufacturers and marketers into one room, share experiences, and identify concrete solutions that the food industry can implement.

This commitment to find workable strategies is a most encouraging step to reach a solution that will benefit everyone. I am hoping that this is the beginning of some giant steps and real progress, so the next generation will be sure to live longer than ours.

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