

Marion Nestle

'Health claims are just like Pandora's Box. It is better to avoid them, as in principle they are misleading, without any exception. For the industry, however, it is a way to sell more products.'

CLAIMS ARE LIKE PANDORA'S BOX

These words are spoken by food expert Marion Nestle, professor at New York University in New York City. Nestle is one of the most influential food experts in the world, not only in the academic community but also in the popular media. For instance, she 'acted' in the film *Supersize Me*, in which Morgan Spurlock lived on McDonald's burgers and fries for a month. Oprah, too, discovered her quite some time ago.

In short, Nestle's words carry a lot of

weight, and that is why the industry and related interest groups regard her as a formidable opponent. The more so because she speaks her mind quite frankly.

Marion, it has been four years since we last met. At the time you expressed harsh criticism against the food industry, especially for its role in the obesity problem. Since that time a lot has changed, for instance, in the field of reformulation of products or labelling. Have you become milder in your judgement?

'No, not really. Yes, it is true that most American companies have adjusted their products, for instance by adding vitamins or removing trans fats. But these reformulations are often only cosmetic, so I doubt they will have much effect on public health. The motives behind these efforts are not altruistic. Companies make their products 'more healthy', so that they can put health claims on the labels. On the other hand, large multinationals continue to advertise products that are less healthy, but more profitable, and they put much more money into advertising the old junk foods than in the reformulated ones. Do I have hard evidence of this? Not as much as I'd like but *Advertising Age* and other publications sometimes provide data that prove this point. The new products are just window dressing to keep pressure groups at bay, but in the end companies are just doing business as usual. They have no choice. They have to do what they can to expand sales in order to keep growing.'

What do you have against health claims? Aren't they supposed to help consumers make responsible choices, provided the claim has a scientific basis?

'In principle, health claims are misleading because they suggest that consuming a specific product will prevent disease. No one product can do that; it is the entire diet that counts. And we know that consumers tend to interpret claims incorrectly. For example, people in the US interpret the claim 'free of trans fats' to mean the same as 'free of calories'.

And how about labelling? Large American and European companies have adjusted their labelling on a large scale, for instance, by sticking health labels onto their products. Isn't that a sign that the industry is taking its responsibility?

'I am not too happy about the current private initiatives. Companies like Kraft and Pep-



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siCo have developed their own criteria to label some products as 'healthier' alternatives. Often these "healthier" products differ only slightly from the companies standard products—say by one or two grams of sugars. Even so they display a label suggesting that it is a health food. A 'traffic light' solution that uses clear colour signals seems a more effective solution to me and I'd like to see it tried and evaluated. However, in the US right now, the political feasibility of adopting such a system is low.

These companies do make use of independent experts in the food research domain...

'Yes, all of the "independent" experts are well-respected members of the scientific community. I just hope they get paid well. I myself have been asked to join advisory committees and boards of directors of food companies, but my policy is to decline such invitations. They represent too great a conflict of interest. Too bad. They would make me a rich woman when company shares are involved.'

According to your words, the industry apparently does not take its responsibility. Are the consumers doing any better in this respect?

'During the last few years some segments of American society have become much more involved in food issues to the point where what they are doing constitutes a new social movement. Parents are demanding bans on soda pop and other junk foods and healthier meals in schools. At the federal level, several members of Congress are introducing legislation aimed at curbing the marketing of junk foods to children. This is grass roots democracy, in which social changes are introduced from the people on up. There is a 'but', however. The people involved in this movement tend to be highly educated and well-to-do, what we in the US call the worried well. Poorer, less educated Americans are not only less well-informed, they also lack the money to buy healthier products and are making do with the relatively cheap junk foods.' So the movement needs to find ways to reach people who most need to eat better food.

Isn't it the role of the government to look after this problem, for instance, by setting up awareness-raising campaigns?

'Awareness-raising campaigns do not have a very good track record. In practice, most educational initiatives have proved to have little or no effect. This is hardly surprising, given the amounts that food companies spend on marketing. My current favourite example is Kellogg's annual expenditure of \$24 million just to advertise one product—its salty snack Cheez-



Its] The amount spent for that one product alone enormously exceeds the entire nutrition education expenditure of the federal government by nearly ten times.'

Then what should the government do?

'Two issues are important: price policy and marketing aimed at children. Firstly, the price issue. By heavily subsidising certain products, such as corn and soybeans, we keep the purchasing threshold of highly processed junk foods very low. [NOTE: the sugar situation is more complicated since it depends on tariffs rather than subsidies] By the end of this year the US farm bill, in which the country's agricultural policy is laid down, will be revised. Many groups are trying to get the farm bill to establish policies that promote health and help prevent obesity.. At the moment, however, it looks like the farm bill will remain about the same and that current policies on subsidies will continue. The House of Representatives [the lower house of the United States Congress, ed.] has already voted to keep the existing bill intact. Agribusiness wants the subsidies to continue and places great pressure on Congress to keep changes to a minimum.'

What can the American government do to restrict the marketing aimed at children?

'It could do plenty but uses the First Amendment (freedom of speech) as an excuse not to. The courts have ruled that the First Amendment applies to corporate as well as individual speech, but our Federal Trade Commission is becoming increasingly active in looking at ways to restrict some of the worst marketing practices. As a result, food companies are scrambling to take voluntary action to head off regulations. They are promising to stop marketing their worst junk foods to children. We will have to wait and see whether they keep these promises. My guess is that it will be difficult for them to do so unless they can figure out ways to increase sales at the same time. In the meantime, the proposed legislation has not yet been adopted.'

Will it be worthwhile at all to regulate marketing aimed at children? In countries where it has been restricted by the govern-

ment, obesity among children is still on the rise.

'From what I observe, obesity rates are rising less rapidly in such countries than in those in which the marketing practices of the industry have not been restricted. There is so much evidence that marketing aimed at children is effective in influencing their preferences, choices, and consumption of foods. Children recognise certain brands at very young ages, and demand them of their parents. Parents who say they do not watch TV and never go to McDonald's are astounded that their two-year-old children recognize the McDonald's logo and ask to be taken there. Marketing aimed at children is also becoming increasingly covert. It is not just that companies use TV commercials or cartoon characters to advertise products. They increasingly use the Internet, mobile phones, and computer games. These are often invisible to parents who may be less aware of the latest technological gadgets.'

Finally, you have recently published a book entitled What to eat? This is the first time you have written a popular – read: accessible – book. Why?

'That is not entirely true. My first book FoodPolitics was aimed at a general public, albeit the better educated part. And Food Politics comes out in a new, updated edition in October. What to Eat is aimed at a broader audience. I wrote it because Food Politics elicited lots of requests for more direct information about diets. People said things like 'You just told us about the politics of food, but what should we eat?' They particularly said that the huge number of choices in supermarkets put them into paralysis. They said they found shopping for food to be painfully confusing. There are thousands of products in all kinds of sizes, weights, qualities and prices. How can a person make the right choices in this environment? I wrote What to Eat to help clear up some of that confusion. . It deals with many of the same issues as Food Politics but in a more pragmatic way. I used supermarkets as an organizing device to discuss the issues at a more practical level to make them easier for the public to understand. People tell me that they lose weight after reading my book. They are eating in a completely different way.' ■