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## CANCER IN THE KITCHEN?

Pundits claim that television brought violence and sensationalism into the American living room. Perhaps this is true. By analogy, we are prompted to suggest that saccharin has brought science and toxicity into the American kitchen and dining room.

The conflicting arguments concerning this chemical substance have dramatically brought home to the average citizen the harsh reality of benefit-to-risk, of informed choice, of the fallacy of absolute safety, and of a host of other scientific issues, in a way that no other controversy before it has ever done.

In recent years, the public has been generally puzzled by the apparent inability of health professionals and medical scientists to agree that this drug or that drug should or should not be permitted to be used in therapy. Similar confusion has surrounded the questions raised about food additives such as monosodium glutamate, diagnostic techniques such as X-rays and mammography, environmental pollutants such as aerosol fluorocarbons, and various other items which have come to be regarded as a part of everyday life.

But in all these cases, it seemed that the hazards were relatively remote, and the perceived reliance upon—or need for—the item involved was not critical or even very important to a great number of people. Hence, few people got very excited over these matters, except to express impatience with the apparent inability of “the experts” to agree one way or the other in terms that were clearly black or white.

Regrettably, the inability of scientists to arrive at such unequivocal answers created an attitude of suspicion and distrust on the part of much of the public. For example, sinister motives frequently have been ascribed to fluoridation of drinking water, to controls on purported health cures such as krebiozan and laetrile, to the establishment of automobile exhaust standards, and to the regulation of flights of supersonic aircraft.

At best, these issues have been publicly perceived as selfish policies by a profit hungry industry. At worst, they have been branded as subversive political plots designed to destroy the physical and mental well-being of the general population. And always there were cries of interference with personal freedom and constitutional rights. No wonder, then, that science has lost its luster and scientists are no longer accorded the hero worship so common just a generation ago.

But for all its problems, headaches, and general nuisance effect, the saccharin controversy has proven to have considerable educational value. Even the average lay person seems to have a reasonable understanding of the questions involved, the uncertainty of the hazard, and the hard choices to be made.

Moreover, saccharin is something with which the consumer readily identifies. It is in the low calorie soft drinks, the diet foods on the supermarket shelves, the packets of sweetener on restaurant tables. People of all ages are weight and calorie conscious; artificial sweeteners are felt to provide a convenient, economical, and taste-satisfying answer to this problem.

However, only one generally acceptable artificial sweetener is currently available, and fuzzy questions have now been raised as to just how safe it is. People are very unhappy with this situation; nevertheless, they are able to comprehend and understand the dilemma it poses. It is also one that, at least for the moment, they are being forced to decide for themselves—does one push the button for the diet cola in the vending machine, or the button for the sugar-sweetened version? The choice is there, and the person is thirsty now. And the answer isn't easy.

Consequently, although the pharmaceutical world is primarily taken up with what impact the proposed saccharin ban will have on drug formulations and related products such as dentifrices and mouthwash, this far-reaching proposal has brought the general public face-to-face with the type of hard decision-making common to many contemporary scientific issues. Hopefully, this experience will provide the public with a better comprehension of the difficulty involved—even for “the experts”—in making the best choice when these kinds of situations arise in the future.

—EGF