Thoughts about Chocolate, Junk Food, and the Constitution

Stanford T. Shulman, MD

To balance the somber topics of pediatric trauma and suicide prevention featured in this month’s issue, guest edited by Pediatric Annals Board Member Robert Sege, MD, I thought you might appreciate somewhat lighter fare.

In a recent article in The New England Journal of Medicine, Franz H. Messerli, MD reports the results of a study evaluating the possible relationship between chocolate consumption and cognitive function in populations.¹

He used a country’s number of Nobel laureates per capita as a surrogate for the proportion of people in that country with superior cognitive function. This was then correlated with data on the yearly chocolate consumption per capita in 22 countries.

**CHOCOLATE MAKES US SMARTER**

Messerli found that there was a very highly significant positive linear correlation between chocolate consumption per capita and the number of Nobel winners per 10 million population ($r = 0.79, P < .0001$). The author concluded that either: 1) chocolate intake improves cognitive function (as it does in rats); 2) enhanced cognitive performance leads to greater chocolate consumption; or 3) an underlying mechanism causes both increased chocolate intake and increased smarts. The study noted that the specific chocolate intake of individual Nobel laureates is unknown at present. I imagine the data has been warmly received by all chocolateholics like me. I actually feel smarter just reading the article!

**‘PROMINENT PLACEMENT’**

On a more serious note, in another recent New England Journal of Medicine, Deborah A. Cohen, MD, MPH and Susan H. Babey, PhD, discuss the misconception that food-related decisions are made consciously and deliberately.² The authors explore how this relates to our obesity epidemic: “The reality is that food choices are often automatic and made without full conscious awareness.”²

They cite, as an example, the placement of candy at the cash register by retailers. This is, according to the authors, based on the strategy of “impulse marketing,” which encourages spur-of-the-moment and emotion-related purchases and is based on data indicating that prominently placing a product at the end of the aisle in stores can greatly increase sales. The authors argue that prominent placement of foods associated with chronic diseases such as obesity really should be treated as a risk factor for those medical conditions.

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²Dr. Shulman is the recipient of the AAP 2011 Award for Lifetime Contribution to Infectious Disease Education.

An avid stamp collector, Dr. Shulman chooses relevant stamps from his personal collection to accompany his column each month.

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governing the placement of foods in retail outlets to protect consumers could be developed.

Although a bit extreme perhaps, maybe even “Big Brotherish,” in view of the seriousness of the obesity epidemic with all of its ramifications — including chronic illness and the cost of its treatment — there is an important underlying concept here that should not be rejected without careful consideration.

JUNK FOOD AND THE CONSTITUTION

A related piece in the same issue by Jennifer L. Pomeranz, JD, MPH, and Kelly D. Brownell, PhD, analyzes government’s legal authority to regulate food-industry practices such as Boston’s prohibition of the sale of sugar-sweetened drinks in municipal buildings; the ban on sugar-sweetened drinks and low-nutrition snacks in many public schools; and New York City’s recent soft drink size regulations. The authors conclude that even if the food industry attempts legal challenges to these kinds of policies, they are likely to fail, and the policies are very likely to be found constitutional.

These ideas suggest that, just as we have imposed stringent anti-smoking regulations to benefit society, food/calorie marketing regulations that help protect our health might be the next frontier.

THIS MONTH’S STAMPS

The stamps illustrating this column include a souvenir sheet from Tanzania issued in 2007 as part of a national AIDS campaign. The four stamps emphasize AIDS education, prevention of new infections (condoms), “Sing to Stop AIDS,” and a message to not segregate people who have AIDS.

Two stamps from Ireland (Éire) were issued in 2010 to honor two very well-known international humanitarians: Mother Teresa and Jean Henri Dunant.

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REFERENCES