

NEWS RELEASE

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Secret Document Shows Bush Administration Effort to Stop Global Anti-Obesity Initiative

The Bush Administration made a secret effort ten days ago to head off an initiative of the World Health Organization (WHO) to reduce the worldwide incidence of obesity, diabetes, cancer and other chronic diseases.

The effort came in the form of a letter from William R. Steiger, Special Assistant to the Secretary of Health and Human Services, to WHO Director-General J.W. Lee. The letter recites arguments made often by the junk food industry, which in turn echo the efforts of the tobacco industry to deny a connection between smoking and ill health.

The letter is available at: <http://www.commercialalert.org/bushadmincomment.pdf>. [Large file: 1.7MB].

“The Bush Administration is putting the interests of the junk food industry ahead of the health of people – including children – on a global scale,” said Gary Ruskin, executive director of Commercial Alert, a nonprofit organization that works to reduce the incidence of marketing-related diseases, such as obesity, type 2 diabetes, alcoholism and diseases incurred through smoking. “The Administration’s arguments border on the ludicrous. Does anyone outside the Administration and the junk food industry truly doubt that the consumption and marketing of high-calorie junk food plays a role in obesity and other chronic diseases?”

“Why would this Administration – or any administration – invoke the moral authority of the United States of America on behalf of the junk food and the obesity lobby? If the Bush Administration is successful in halting the WHO initiative, in the long-term it could potentially cost millions of lives across the planet, in terms of needless deaths due to obesity, diabetes, cancer, cardiovascular disease and other chronic diseases,” Ruskin said.

“While the Bush Administration tells Americans to improve their diet, it tells WHO not to send the same message out globally,” Ruskin said. “Does President Bush really want to go down in history as a champion of global obesity lobby?”

The World Health Organization report regarding “Diet, Nutrition and the Prevention of Chronic Diseases” (Report 916) explains WHO’s global effort to prevent diseases such as obesity, diabetes, cancer and cardiovascular disease. In its letter to Director-General Lee, the Bush Administration’s position is essentially that the scientific evidence is too scant to take meaningful action to prevent these diseases worldwide.

The fate of the WHO Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health may be decided next week by the WHO Executive Board at a meeting to prepare agenda items for the May 2004 World Health Assembly.

Following are quotes from the Bush Administration letter to Director-General Lee, with responses.

Marketing of Junk Food and Fast Food

Bush Administration: “the assertion that heavy marketing of energy-dense food or fast food outlets increases the risk of obesity is supported by almost no data. In children, there is a consistent relationship between television viewing and obesity. However, it is not at all clear that this association is mediated by the advertising on television. Equally plausible linkages include displacement of more vigorous physical activity by television viewing, as well as consumption of food while watching television. No data have yet clearly demonstrated that the advertising on children’s television causes obesity.”

Response: “Come on. Corporations aren’t that stupid. They have spent billions on advertising junk food to kids for one reason – it works. The ad industry knows this. Parents know it all too well. To deny a connection between the marketing of diets high in calories, and childhood obesity, is to deny common sense,” Ruskin said. A prominent 2002 article in the *Lancet* condemned the “toxic environment” that has contributed to an alarming rise in the worldwide incidence of childhood obesity. Part of that “toxic environment” is produced through “marketing campaigns” that “specifically target children.” The article recommends prohibiting “food advertisement and marketing directed at children.” Based on both reasonable presumption and clear evidence, last week the American Academy of Pediatrics recently issued a policy statement urging that “advertising of sweetened soft drinks within the classroom should be eliminated.”

Fruits and Vegetables

Bush Administration: The Administration questions the scientific basis for “the linking of fruit and vegetable consumption to decreased risk of obesity and diabetes.”

Response: “Our grandmothers apparently knew more than the experts in the Bush Administration. Besides, the Administration is denying its own advice,” Ruskin said. In 2002 testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, William H. Dietz, director of the Division of Nutrition and Physical Activity of the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, called for cheaper pricing of fruits and vegetables in school cafeterias as a part of a strategy to reduce the incidence of childhood obesity. Mr. Dietz’s testimony was titled the “CDC’s Role in Combating the Obesity Epidemic.” In addition, in a 2002 speech to the United Fresh Fruits and Vegetables Association, HHS Secretary Tommy Thompson said “we need the United Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Association to ratchet up their efforts” to “promote your products with the American people” to “build a stronger, healthier future for ourselves and our children.”

“If the Bush Administration really believes that fruits and vegetables are no better than Big Macs and Cokes, in terms of obesity and ill health, then we can’t wait to see its official weight-loss guide,” Ruskin said.

Soft Drinks and Juice

Bush Administration: The letter states that “There is only one study of the relationship of soft drinks and juice to obesity in children, and this is a prospective observational study. No such studies exist in adults. Therefore, although there is a logical mechanism to support a potential relationship between these behaviors and weight gain, the data do not provide sufficient support to be labeled ‘probable.’”

Response: “The Bush Administration truly is empirically-challenged,” Ruskin said. A study in the *Lancet* estimated that the likelihood of children becoming obese among children “increased 1.6 times for each additional can or glass of sugar-sweetened drink they consumed every day.” According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, “Sweetened drinks (fruitades, fruit drinks, soft drinks, etc.) constitute the primary source of added sugar in the daily diet of children.” Based on this and other evidence, the American Academy of Pediatrics recently urged pediatricians to “work to eliminate sweetened drinks in schools.”

“Besides, why would the Administration – the Department of Health and Human Services no less – rise to the defense of soda pop -- a product that contributes nothing to health, and probably contributes much to ill-health, from obesity to tooth decay on down,” Ruskin said.

Fast Food

Bush Administration: The letter states that “with respect to [the link between] fast food [and obesity], there are two prospective studies, two cross-sectional studies, and one ecologic study, and the results are inconsistent. Therefore, HHS would consider this linkage as insufficient to possible, based on the Report’s own rules of evidence.”

Response: “This really does call to mind the desperate claims of tobacco scientists. It’s another case of the Administration seeing what it wants to see and ignoring reality in the process,” Ruskin said. In a study published in the *International Journal of Obesity*, for example, researchers found that, compared to adolescents who did not eat at fast-food restaurants, boys and girls who ate fast food three times in the previous week had far higher calorie intakes: 40 and 37 percent, respectively. A study in this month’s issue of *Pediatrics* estimates that the consumption of fast food “theoretically could account for an additional six pounds of weight gain per child per year.”

“Energy-Dense Foods”

Bush Administration: The letter criticizes the WHO Report for “an unsubstantiated focus on ‘good’ and ‘bad’ foods, and a conclusion that specific foods are linked to non-communicable diseases and obesity (e.g. energy-dense foods, high/added-sugar foods, and drinks, meats, certain types of fats and oils, and higher fat dairy products). The USG [United States Government] favors dietary guidance that focuses on the total diet, promotes the view that all foods can be part of a healthy and balanced diet, and supports personal responsibility to choose a diet conducive to individual energy balance, weight control and health.”

Response: “There is no evidence whatsoever that high-added-sugar and high-added-fat foods are essential to a healthful diet, especially in the amounts that junk food advertising promotes. If the

industry really believed in personal responsibility, then why does it employ the wiles of psychologists and marketing experts to manipulate children and subvert the sense of responsibility?" Ruskin said.

Last year, Commercial Alert wrote and released the Childhood Obesity Prevention Agenda, which was endorsed by dozens of obesity scholars and child advocates. Commercial Alert Executive Director Gary Ruskin wrote a cover article on childhood obesity for the Nov/Dec 2003 issue of *Mothering* magazine.

Commercial Alert is a national nonprofit organization whose mission is to keep the commercial culture within its proper sphere, and to prevent it from exploiting children and subverting the higher values of family, community, environmental integrity and democracy.

Commercial Alert has more than 2000 members, representing all 50 states and the District of Columbia. For more information, visit our website at <http://www.commercialalert.org>.