

Bureaucracy Major Hazard to Health

WARNING: The Head Food Bureaucrat of the United States has determined that eating food may be harmful to your health."

That admonition does not yet appear on packages offered for sale in grocery stores, but it could. If all substances consumed by Americans were subjected to the sensitive analysis and limitations now being applied to food additives, we might exclude so many foods that the variety of diet needed would be unavailable.

Federal law requires removal from the market of any additive which produces even a trace of a carcinogen (substance or agent producing or inciting cancer) in humans or animals, no matter how large the quantities consumed during testing and even though definitive data on causes of cancer still are lacking.

So food additives are taboo, except where bureau officials consider them to be desirable. The same agencies that decide which additives must be left out of foods also decides which additives must be included.

Existing regulations require that bread and flour be enriched with thiamine, riboflavin, niacin, calcium and iron. Pending proposals call for increasing amounts specified, especially iron, in order to decrease anemia caused by nutritional deficiency.

This sounds fine. Eliminate additives that may be harmful and increase additives that may be helpful, according to bureau decision. However, there are other considerations concerning benefits and risks that the public ought to know about.

In a new report, "Food Safety Regulation," a study of the use and limitations of cost-benefit analysis, Rita Ricardo Campbell of Stanford

University has brought up a number of provocative considerations that could upset premature conclusions.

Dr. Campbell notes that the public may not realize the extent to which chemical additives in foods yield benefits in the form of greater supplies, lower prices, greater variety, convenience of delivery and preparation, and, often, better nutritive quality. In many cases which involve risk-benefit decisions, no scientific data are available which lead clearly to a particular decision.

Many consumers do not know that raw agricultural products may unavoidably contain minute amounts of trace elements such as arsenic, cadmium, lead and mercury. "Almost all foods may be shown to have some degree of health risk when consumed in large quantities," the report says, "and we may be forced

to weigh benefits against risks for virtually all foods."

Requirements that iron be added to bread entails risks because individuals may develop "iron overload." Since men are more susceptible than women or children, this conceivably could lead to a federal agency working out different specifications for bread to be eaten according to sex, weight and age of individuals.

People usually know better than bureaucrats what they want to consume and enjoy. In a free society, information about benefits and hazards should be provided and people be allowed to choose their own diets. There does not seem to be any reason why we need a bureaucracy in Washington to decide what we should eat, but that is the direction in which we are headed. Congress already has given away the power.