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Healing with Food

(A regular IJHC column)

SCHIZOID DIETARY ADVICE

Book review by Annemarie Colbin, Ph.D.

Marion Nestle, Ph.D., *Food Politics: How the food industry influences nutrition and health*, Berkeley: University of California Press 2002 480pp \$29.95

Ever wonder about the disconnect between the advice that nutritionists routinely give to those who consult us about how to eat healthfully – and the food messages people get from the media and the supermarket? We, the nutrition counselors, usually say, “Eat plenty of fresh vegetables and fruit, whole grain cereals and breads, beans, small amounts of animal foods. Avoid sugared foods, fried and other greasy foods, canned or frozen foods, snacks devoid of nutrients.” Some of us say, “Be careful with the milk products, coffee, chocolate and soft drinks.” Others will point out the benefits of organically grown or raised foods.

Countering us are the TV and its myriad ads for quick foods, snack foods, convenience foods, and everything canned and frozen, as well as ubiquitous ads in newspapers and (especially) women’s magazines. Considering that a majority of the American public gets its nutrition knowledge from TV and other media, it takes little to figure out who wins in this tug of war. Is that why the public is often utterly confused?

Enter a superb analysis of this situation in a new book by Marion Nestle, Ph.D., professor and Chair of the Department of Nutrition and Food Studies at New York University. This should be required reading for anyone involved in food, diet, and nutrition in any way.

Dr. Nestle begins with an extensive historical overview of the field of food and nutritional advice throughout the 20th Century. She points out the main dichotomy: the food and agriculture industry, concerned with profits, wants people to *eat more*. Healthcare professionals, concerned with obesity and other disease risks, want people to *eat less*. The government is caught in the middle: it needs to support the interests of the business people as much as it needs to care for the health of the public. Therefore, when the government suggests that people eat *less* of anything (fat, salt, sugar, meat) - as in the original 1977 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* - the food industry has a fit and throws as many lobbyists and money at the lawmakers as it takes to change the wording to some variant of *eat more*.

Dr Nestle goes on to uncover how the food companies exploit kids and schools, both through advertising and by placing soft drinks and snack foods in the schools. They actually pay for the space, so that schools find a new source of revenue by allowing the children access to these non-nutritive substances. Here is where it is good to remember that there are alternatives. An October 14, 2002, article by Jon Rappoport in the online newsletter STRATIWire (www.stratiawire.com) describes what happened in the Central Alternative School in Appleton, Wisconsin, when the school eliminated vending machines, burgers, fries, and other fast foods, replacing them with salads, natural meats, whole grain breads, fresh fruit, and clean water. What happened? "Grades are up, truancy is no longer a problem, arguments are rare." In addition, no more dropouts, expelled students, class disruptions, student suicides, or weapons brought to school.

Those of us who are in this field, just trying to help people to eat NORMAL FOOD, have an uphill battle. However, it,s worth fighting it. *Food Politics* gives us good background knowledge to know what we are dealing with.

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