

Editorial

Every Man His Own Nutritionist

THE creature from outer space was puzzled. He saw small groups of dedicated, white-robed scientists huddled over microscopes, rat cages and glassware. Others, in damp jungles or frozen tundras, peered at tongues, eyes and skin. Still others were reviewing diet lists with patients in comfortable offices. All of this, he was told, was Nutrition.

But he also saw hordes of people reading books extolling the medicinal virtue of apple cider vinegar and honey or devouring newspaper columns praising an elixir derived from sea water. He saw tens of thousands of well fed citizens ingesting pellets of alfalfa and parsley, or royal bee jelly or garlic in the hope of preventing or curing disease. This, too, he was told, was Nutrition.

Why this dissonant counterpoint between scientific nutrition with its truly remarkable advances and the continuing popularity of crash diets, health food lecturers, and mail order utopian tonics? One reason, no doubt, lies in the many opportunities available to those who would capitalize on the universal search for a panacea in foods.

If most people are truly like sheep, as some exploiters seem to believe, and if they blindly follow the current nutritional fad, then it is the solemn responsibility of certain policy-makers to prevent this quackery even at the (temporary) loss of a few ill gotten dollars. (Unfortunately, the Food and Drug Administration and the Federal Trade Commission

seem to be only partially effective in this regard.)

The policy-makers to whom this editorial is addressed are the book publishers, the magazine and medical journal editors, the officials in radio and television, the advertising agencies—indeed, everyone in the communications field. Only a sincere effort by these people can prevent the discouraging development of a honey-and-vinegar-cure-all best seller, to cite but one sad example.

Here, then, is a moral issue: Some devious quack or well meaning idiot writes of his new dietary cure for cancer, arthritis, common cold, low back pain or what have you. No doubt the eternal hope that a special food or unique diet will rid the body of its misery leads the unsophisticated masses to quickly read, believe and buy. No doubt some money can be made this way. But it is morally wrong because (1) it is untrue; (2) it often prevents early diagnosis or effective treatment; (3) it raises false hopes; (4) it takes money under false pretenses; and (5) it diverts attention from the true state of affairs.

Now, assuming our policy-makers in the communications field are reasonably honest folk, what can they do to prevent this nonsense which has changed from a benign peccadillo to a malignant monster? It seems to me that publishers, editors and industrial vice-presidents should take advantage of the wealth of expert scientific advice so readily available



everywhere. Existing scientific nutritional organizations should set up committees, panels or study groups (any name will do) which would surely give freely of their opinion of the validity of a nutritional claim. No doubt a few less coins will flow into certain hands, but the result in better health through sounder nutrition is worth infinitely more.

What can the practicing physician do? He can use his most powerful weapon—his personal influence on his patient, together with an assist from the dietitian and nutritionist—to expose the quackery and educate the victimized public. He can set the record straight, not only defensively against the ridiculous claims

of, say, seaweed merchants but also aggressively in favor of what nutritional science has learned over the years. Of course, he, himself, may have to become a bit familiar with our newer knowledge of clinical nutrition, but his obligation in this respect is as great as that of preventing smallpox or poliomyelitis.

If pressure, economic or otherwise, could be applied against the merchants of nutritional nonsense and those who aid and abet it by lending use of their pages and air waves, the sheep might be led into greener pastures. With the abolition of False Nutrition, the visitor from outer space will no longer be confused.

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