

THE ACSH

FOREFRONT OF SCIENCE, OR JUST A FRONT?

Newspapers across the country displayed a startling Thanksgiving menu last year, courtesy of the American Council on Science and Health (ACSH). The meal featured the traditional list of holiday foods with descriptions of the natural carcinogens in all of them. The council's message: Natural carcinogens are far more prevalent in our food than man-made ones. And furthermore, we eat both in amounts far too small to do us harm.

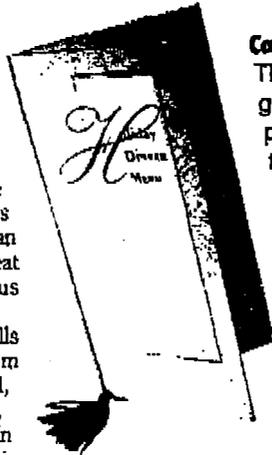
The New York City-based ACSH calls itself "a consumer education consortium concerned with issues related to food, nutrition, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, lifestyle, the environment and health." In its 16 years of existence, it has argued in favor of a variety of controversial chemical products, including saccharin, urea formaldehyde foam insulation, the pesticide ethylene dibromide, and, lately, synthetic bovine growth hormone for dairy cows. In 1985, the council argued that measures to clean up polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, weren't worth the cost. Last year, it claimed New York City's school asbestos scare was baseless.

Too quick to ban?

The council maintains that very few chemicals have been proven to cause cancer in humans through convincing laboratory or epidemiological studies. Beneficial chemicals shouldn't be banned "at the drop of a rat" to avoid small, hypothetical risks, the council says.

According to its president, Elizabeth M. Whelan, the ACSH was founded to counter nonscientific approaches to public-health issues, and it represents mainstream scientific thinking. "The role of people in public health is to prevent premature disease and death, and that's our only role," she told CU. "I have come to believe that there are other agendas by some of these so-called public-health organizations."

Yet the ACSH's positions are nearly always more laissez-faire than those of the Government regulatory agencies as well as those of "so-called public-health organizations." In 1981, the council disagreed with the Environmental Protection Agency's ban of the herbicide 2,4,5-T, which had been associated with cancer, miscarriages, and birth defects. In 1989, it fought the EPA's proposed ban on Alar, a chemical used on apples. For years, it has attacked the use of high-dose animal tests as a basis for regulatory decisions, although the scientific community has long



Cancer a la carte
This Thanksgiving menu, prepared by the ACSH in 1993, said carcinogens in the food posed little health risk.

accepted such tests as useful evidence.

Sometimes, the council appears more interested in fighting regulation than in promoting good science or health. In a recent issue of *Priorities*, the council's quarterly magazine, Whelan argued that new mandated nutrition labeling was a waste of money, in spite of the Government's estimates that it would make consumers healthier and save billions of health-care dollars. "The current labels that already contain fat and cholesterol data have conferred no benefit that I'm aware of," she wrote. "Why should more details and fine-tuning . . . work any better?"

The council's funders would probably agree. The ACSH says it receives about 40 percent of its money from industry, particularly manufacturers in the food-processing, beverage, chemical, and pharmaceutical industries, and much of the remainder from industry-supported foundations. Major contributors in fiscal 1992, for example, included American Cyanamid Co., Archer Daniels Midland Co., Chevron Corp., the Coca-Cola Co., Dow USA, E.I. du Pont de Nemours and Co., Exxon Corp., General Mills Inc., Johnson & Johnson, Kellogg Co., Nestle USA, the National Soft Drink Association, Pfizer Inc., Joseph E. Seagram & Sons Inc., the Sugar Association Inc., Union Carbide Corp., and Uniroyal Chemical Co.

Critics say that industry funding compromises any claim to scientific independence. Whelan counters that some 230 scientific and policy advisers—many highly respected in their fields—regularly review ACSH publications. Moreover, she claims that industries give money only as general support for the council's work, not to fund projects that they might hope to influence. ACSH pamphlets state that the council

does not accept support from individual corporations for specific research projects. "We don't take earmarked money," Whelan told CU last year. "We accept general operating funds. With the exception of foundations, we do not tie the money to what we're doing."

Hot in hand

But CU has learned that the council actively seeks earmarked funding, at least to disseminate its work. In an internal memorandum dated March 16, 1992, Whelan reported that her staff would seek "more CCC money . . . to help us get new sweetener booklet out." The CCC is the Calorie Control Council, the trade group for companies that make low-calorie foods, artificial sweeteners, and fat replacers. Later the memo says, "ask McNeil Specialty for \$10,000 toward sweetener paper." McNeil Specialty Products Co., a subsidiary of Johnson & Johnson, owns the U.S. marketing rights to *Splenda*, an artificial sweetener sold in Canada but not yet approved for sale in the U.S.

The memo also suggests that "special attention" be paid to "Mr. McDermott at Searle about meat money." G.D. Searle & Co. is a subsidiary of Monsanto Co. Thomas McDermott is now director of biotechnology communications for Monsanto's agricultural group.

Whelan told CU last year she couldn't think of any corporation that gives the council more than one or two percent of its funding. Whether or not that is so for 1993, the 1992 memo says Monsanto and its subsidiaries, G.D. Searle and the NutraSweet Co., contributed a total of \$105,000. If given in a single fiscal year, that would represent about 8 percent of the council's total revenues. The memo calls Monsanto "our largest funder." The council has championed a number of products made by Monsanto subsidiaries, including lawn-care chemicals, artificial sweeteners such as *NutraSweet*, and bovine growth hormone.

According to Whelan, the bulk of ACSH funding comes from not-for-profit foundations, whose interests are presumably non-commercial. Yet her 1992 memo makes little distinction between corporate funders and corporate-sponsored foundations. The memo bemoans the loss of funding from the Shell Oil Co. Foundation, a longtime contributor. "When one of the largest international petrochemical companies will not support ACSH, the great defender of petrochemical companies," Whelan wrote, "one wonders who will."