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41 EAST 42ND STREET, NEW YORK, N.Y. 10017, 697-5100

FOR SOCIETY OF PLASTIC INDUSTRIES

PROGRAM	NOT FOR WOMEN ONLY	STATION	WNBC/TV
DATE	September 16, 1976	9AM	CITY New York

FULL TEXT

HUGH DOWNS: Hello. I'm Hugh Downs. We're in Washington this week to find out what the government is doing, among other entities, to keep our food safe. Today we're checking out all those new foods that we're subject to. And is natural good, and chemical bad?

We want you to join our panel now, and we have experts, top government, industry, and consumer experts, who will help determine who, if anyone, is keeping our food safe. A subject Not For Women Only.

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DOWNS: Now, we're back, and we greet, please, our panel of experts.

First, Jack Walden, who is Assistant Commissioner for Public Affairs for the Food and Drug Administration. It's his agency that regulates most of the chemical substances put in foods, as well as most chemicals fed to animals, who are used for food.

Dr. Sidney Wolf, a physician, as well as co-founder, along with Ralph Nader of the Public Citizen's Health Research Group. Dr. Wolf specializes in occupational hazards, and health, and drug safety, problems with the health care system, and food safety.

James Tillotson is a food scientist, active in both the industry that cans food, and processes it. He sits on the Committee for Food Protection of the Grocery Manufacturers of America, and also the Scientific Research Committee of the National Cannery Association.

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And Beatrice Trum Hunter, who's a consumer activist, who has zeroed in on food safety. She's the author of several books, among them "Consumer Beware", "Food Additives And Your Health"--we've been talking about that; and her most recent one is called "Mirage of Safety".

So, we talked yesterday about the whole idea of what is an additive, and about some of the dangers of some of the additives. We touched very briefly on the cyclamate controversy, and I bring that up, only because, for the moment, there's a great panic about cyclamates, and now that whole idea is under a cloud again, that maybe the cyclamates aren't harmful in the way we thought they were, and they might be brought back, I understand. Is it possible it could survive a mangling like it took?

JACK WALDEN: The Food and Drug Administration was responsible in 1969, I believe it was, in removing cyclamate from the market--that's artificial sweetener, as you know, and it was banned at that time, and it was banned, not because it had ever hurt anybody, but because the law, under which we operate, says that when the substance could be demonstrated to, that it caused cancer in test animals, we had to ban it; and we did.

The law also provides, and science is built this way, that as time goes by, and more science is brought to bear, yesterday's scientific fact may be today's scientific fallacy.

Now, we have, on the basis of that assertion by the petitioners, the industry--the FDA is today again considering the safety of cyclamates, and whether or not to allow its return to the market.

DOWNS: Was there some shift in scientific findings that invalidated those first findings, that's under a cloud?

GUEST: That's the question that's now been raised. The petitioners say yes, in addition to which they say that, I think that some of them say that our original ban was a mistake, and an error; we are now trying with expert help to decide, if new data or the combined universe of science now says that it's safe to use it.

DOWNS: Let me ask you a really weird question. Is there any truth to the idea that, rumor that the sugar lobby pressured your agency to do away with cyclamates on the grounds that they were cutting into sugar sales?

WALDEN: I just reject that out of hand. I wasn't in the Food and Drug Administration in 1969, but I was in the Secretary's office. I had a hand in the action, the banning action. It was based entirely, that ban, entirely on animal studies, provided by the chief maker of cyclamates.

DR. SIDNEY WOLF: I'd have to agree. I mean, as someone who supports a stronger FDA, more funds, all the time, which our organization Public Citizen does. I don't think there's any evidence that the sugar people coerced, put pressure on the FDA to ban cyclamates.

I think they're a good example of an agency being faced with some evidence that there may be a lack of safety, or there may be a danger more appropriately associated with a chemical, taking an action. And I think that what's happening now is people are saying: We've done more studies. Let's see whether the new studies change our original decision.

The original decision was not really taken, as you indicated, on the basis of the Delaney Clause, which says you can't add anything to the food supply, if it causes cancer, although one of the many studies showing problems with it was a study, which suggested cancer. There were other problems with retardation of growth, some question about genetic damage, and now more studies, let's look at them, and if cyclamates look okay, cross the board, not just for cancer, then maybe some limited reintroduction should occur, and I think that's the same story that could occur with Red Two. Red Two will be taken off the market; and if someone, at some future time, is able to do more studies, and show that there isn't any question about the studies which show that Red Two now is a hazard, that those studies were wrong, it could go back on.

So I think that acting on the side of caution is always the better idea, particularly for things that really don't add anything to our diet.

JAMES TOLLITSON: I think there's a very important fact here, this example shows, that one study isn't the be-all and end-all. It's unfortunate in the case of cyclamates, and it required twenty-two long term feeding studies to overcome one poorly designed test, and decision that was made in great haste, and this is the problem. At the drop of a rat, it's often said, they're ready to put an industry out of business.

WOLF: The decision was made in great haste, because even before that one test showing cancer was positive, the FDA had already moved to place a previous restriction on it, based

on some of the other problems with it. So really, it wasn't just one test.

(OVERLAPPING VOICES)

BEATRICE TRUM HUNTER: No. It wasn't one test. And I think that this statement really needs correction. The FDA did not ban it, because of the cancer-inciting qualities. The FDA reclassified it as a drug, and as a drug, it did not come under the Delaney Clause. It came under the restriction that it had to be proven safe and efficacious, and it could not be proven efficacious, because it did not do what it was claimed to do, and that is--

DOWN: What did they claim?

HUNTER: Well, the claim, the efficacious claim was that it would help to reduce obesity, with people who used it as an obesity--a weight reduction. And it did not do this--neither in clinical studies with people, nor with animal studies; and on this basis, it was thrown out.

DOWNS: How could that be that there's--there was no nutritive value, was there?

HUNTER: No. But it was--

WALDEN: There's no nutritive value, but the point is, we did, in fact, ban it, in some degree.

HUNTER: You did not use the Delaney Clause, though.

WALDEN: We didn't use it. We banned it as a food additive. We tried to preserve it.

HUNTER: Exactly.

WALDEN: And for use as a drug.

HUNTER: Even with its hazards.

WALDEN: The hazards were not that clear. But let me say, any drug has a hazard, and some of those hazards are acceptable, if--

WOLF: ...as a benefit--

WALDEN: ...outweighs. Now we tried to preserve cyclamate, back in '70 as a drug, because there was strong argument

that an artificial sweetener was entirely appropriate, and useful and helpful to diabetics. It was not required, no diabetic is going to die, for lack of sugar, or sugar in their cereal.

HUNTER: But it was shown to...

(CONFLICT OF VOICES)

WALDEN: We found that we couldn't do that, that the opposition to cyclamate, that the lack of clear effectiveness, and a need for it as a drug was such that we moved against it as a drug, as well as as a food additive.

DOWNS: I don't understand why it wasn't efficacious, if it was used as a substitute for sugar, that would mean that much sugar that somebody obese would not be eating.

WOLF: So people then turned around, and despite the fact that they were using cyclamates still had a craving, which wasn't satisfied by the cyclamate--

DOWNS: Is that--

WOLF: --and ate other things. That's the problem.

WALDEN: But our reluctance to ban it as a drug was based on an honest effort to provide help in the treatment of obesity, and in the treatment of diabetics, or not in the treatment, but in the care of diabetics.

WOLF: But it didn't work for that.

WALDEN: No.

WOLF: That's the problem.

TILLOTSON: The National Cancer Institute Ad Hoc Committee on this has reviewed it at this juncture. Correct, Jack?

WALDEN: Let me, just for the sake...

(CONFLICT OF VOICES)

WALDEN: ...that I can say in one sentence. We have, with all of the available data now, both the old data before, and the present data, all of it, we gave it to a special committee of the National Cancer Institute, and we said: Look, help

us. What do these data now mean? Where do we stand today?
Is it safe?

They have been meeting for several months. Quite recently they toured all of Europe, looking at the evidence over there. They recently said that by mid-March of this year, this committee would report to the director of the National Cancer Institute, who would then report to the Commissioner of Food and Drugs on whether in the basis of--their opinion, the Food and Drug Administration should put it back on the market, or keep it off the market.

I would add just one other thing. They are looking at the cancer problem. There may be other problems with cyclamat s. That's not the only question that has been raised. In animal tests there have been a question of effect on the reproductive organs of male animals. And we will examine those issues too, y u can be sure, before we allow cyclamates back on the market.

X
DOWNS: I see.

Now, I was surprised to find that things that food is wrapped in are classified as additives, on the grounds that sometimes some of the chemicals from some of those wrappings find their way into the food. And let's explore that controversy just briefly, because you can't, well, you could, if we went back to the cracker barrel, I suppose, but food has to be packed in things now for sanitary reasons, and some of the things they're packaged in have come under a cloud. What is the truth of how much migrates from the wrapping from the food?

WOLF: Well, it depends what kind of wrapping there is.

DOWNS: I'm thinking of plastic wrappings.

WOLF: In the summer of 1975, Public Citizen asked the FDA to ban the use of polyvinyl chloride in bottles. It had been used during some period of time for things such as cooking pots; and in semi-rigid packaging, such as meat may occur; and also the film that covers meat, and the FDA has, in fact, proposed, and it's now being processed, to ban at least certain uses of polyvinyl chloride.

The reason for the ban is that polyvinyl chloride, which is a plastic, itself does not appear to be harmful. But there are small amounts in the plastic of vinyl chloride. Vinyl chloride is the starting material from which polyvinyl chloride is made, and it is vinyl chloride that is now shown to

cause cancer in humans, and unfortunately humans; and tests by both the food industry, and by the FDA showed that when you wrap certain kinds of foods in bottles, or semi-rigid packages, made out of polyvinyl chloride, that some of this vinyl chloride goes from the package into the food. You can measure it there. And since it's a cancer-causing chemical, it shouldn't be used, and at least, thus far, there's been a partial response to our petition. We think it should have gone farther, but at least, some of the more common uses, the bottles, and the semi-rigid packages, before too very long, will not be in use, and I think that's good, because there's too much cancer, and here is a known cancer-causing chemical. It's avoidable.

DOWNS: Are we going back to butcher paper then, or--

HUNTER: Even that may have chemicals today. A few years ago the alcoholic beverage industry had considered using plastic, rather than glass containers, and they began to find a lot of off flavors in the alcoholic beverages, because of an interaction; and they did stop short of actually changing over to this plastic material.

WOLF: Polyvinyl Scotch.

WALDEN: The Food and Drug Administration, as you remember, when it came to our attention that they were doing this, and alcohol was a big help in leaching the vinyl chloride out of the bottle, we banned the use of plastic bottles with liquor.

HUNTER: I would say that there are many other foods that have an interaction. Anybody examining a cheese that is wrapped with red wax, you know, in peeling that red wax off, you see that there is actually a deposit of the red on the surface of the cheese. That's quite visible.

TILLOTSON: I think there's a point we shouldn't neglect here, that the food industry cannot use a wrapping for a container, unless Food and Drug approves it. We have to go through a testing protocol. It has to be approved. We just can't use anything that comes along. And there are very rigid methods of testing.

WALDEN: And it is just illegal to use a material that does leach something into the food.

WOLF: The problem was that the food industry didn't bother testing polyvinyl chloride to see whether it caused cancer, before it went on the market, and at that point in time, the Food and Drug Administration let it go on. We now know more

X about cancer. Everyone learns more ten years after, than they knew before, and now, it is an appropriate test, and it has been shown to cause cancer.

DOWNNS: We're going to have some questions from our audience here assembled, and we're going to take time out now for this message. We'll be right back.

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DOWNNS: Our audience has some questions now for our panel. Let's see who might be first. Do I see hands? Yes. Over here at this table.

MAN: Sugar is the most-used additive in food, and I have a question that concerns whether or not the high incidence of hyperactivity in children in America can be directly related to the high level of sugar used in our food as an additive.

HUNTER: There is a pediatric allergist, Dr. William Cook, who has pinpointed sugar in large amounts as the culprit in the cases that he studied of the hyperactive children. If he takes them off of all of the sugar in the diet, they lose their hyperkinesis.

Dr. Feingold, of course, has found the artificial colors and flavors producing a lot of the hyperkinesis. The two of them are really quite close together, because the same foods that contain the artificial colors and flavors often also contain large amounts of sugar.

WALDEN: That's a good question, if I might add here, Hugh--

DOWNNS: Sure.

WALDEN: --because the food additives in general, and their possible effect, or non effect on hyperactivity in children is one that is increasing in discussion, and in scientific interest; and the Food and Drug Administration this past month put together a protocol, and submitted to the Secretary of HEW for approval on how to direct a concerted research effort to test out the hypothesis of Dr. Feingold about the food additives and Dr.--

TRUM: Crook.

WALDEN: --Crook about the sugar.

So there is activity going on.

DOWNNS: Okay. Now, here's a question here.

MAN: ...about the plastic containers for liquids and such. I understand the Food and Drug Administration has recently given tentative approval for packaging of some soda and beer in plastic containers, and one of the major soda companies is doing so in Rhode Island in a test project; and I wonder how this sort of goes along with the concern that's been voiced for...

DOWNNS: ...same plastic?

(OVERLAPPING VOICES)

WALDEN: No. It is not. It is a different plastic than PVC, and it is a plastic that we have judged to be safe for these purposes, and not to leach material into the soda, and the biggest argument really that's come up in that regard, as far as we're concerned is, we filed a statement, and said that it was not the Food and Drug Administration, it is not our responsibility to be concerned with the litter problem; and a great many people who don't like the plastic littering more than I do, thought we should have moved in on, and maybe turned it down on that basis. But we simply can't. That's somebody else's problem.

DOWNNS: The word 'additive' is taking on a pejorative flavor now. Are there good additives and bad additives, and-- how do you feel about that?

HUNTER: Well, I think that there are some additives that are certainly not harmful. The problem is we don't always know which these are. Things such as ascorbic acid and Vitamin E can be used as an anti-oxidant. These, I think, are very acceptable. But they're not frequently used. For example, the synthetic anti-oxidants are usually used, rather than Vitamin E.

WOLF: I think it really gets back to the question of benefit and risk. People are used to thinking of food additives in terms of things that are completely mixed up with their food; and I think a different way of looking at it, and I've brought somethings along, would be to think about food additives instead, as pills.

If someone told you to take two pills with your meals three times a day that looked something like this, and

amounted to several pounds over the course of the year, several pounds of pills, you might say: What are you telling me to take these for?

And the answer would have a lot to do with what the benefits are and what the risks.

One reason for taking them is because they look pretty, and that certainly has to do with a lot of the reasons certain food additives are put in. Red for color, texture, and so forth.

Other things that might be in here could be lead. And you'd say: What are you giving me lead for? And the answer would be that there is lead in a certain number of canned foods. The industry knows that it can further reduce the amount of lead, which comes out of the can. Some of it comes from the products themselves; but a lot of it is leached out from the cans. It's been able to do this with certain kinds of cans, but it hasn't moved as fast as it should, to do it with others.

So, for each of the chemicals in these pills, or whatever, it would be appropriate to say: What are you giving it to me for? What's the benefit, and what's the risk? If the benefit is zero, no risk should be tolerated. If there is some measurable benefit, as there may be with some preservatives, as Miss Hunter has just mentioned, then one might be able to accept at least certain low level risks; and I think the problem is that consumers not only don't know the names of these chemicals, in many cases, but they certainly don't know the benefits and the risks. Advertising tells us only the benefits, and doesn't tell us at all about the risks.

DOWNNS: Let's see if we can get another question here. Clear over here.

MAN: We've been talking about the American government. What are we doing with the foreign governments that submit products to this country for consumer use?

DOWNNS: The FDA has--

WALDEN: Yes. The FDA has jurisdiction over foreign foods entering the country. But our jurisdiction stops at the water line. We can stop foods from coming in, and we do regularly at all ports of entry, test foods, and other products for conformance with our ideas of what they should be in terms of safety, purity, wholesomeness, and we turn a great--it occupies a great deal of our time.

DOWNNS: Time for one more over here.

Back at the table in the rear. I see your hand. I don't see your--there you are.

WOMAN: Since we already have more than three thousand additives in our foods, could we not, through the FDA, ask, or demand a moratorium on additional food additives in our food?

WALDEN: You may. You certainly may. But you, the consumer, have got to demand it. We can't dictate it.

WOLF: Write to Jack.

TILLOTSON: May I make a comment?

DOWNES: Yes.

TILLOTSON: One of the things about science is that they turn up better things all the time.

HUNTER: And worse things.

X
TILLOTSON: All right. And worse. Also, in this process, we may have better and safer additives as we move on. Better packaging. This gentleman wants better packaging. You want to stop this process.

WOLF: I think that's a good point. I think, for instance, for those additives, such as some of the preservatives, where there is some kind of benefit, instead of putting a moratorium in not allowing any new ones on, maybe it should be modified to say that we can only allow new food additives, if they are safer, than ones already existing. I think that would be something that would guarantee a steady process towards safer additives, rather than continuing to have more and more. Because there isn't such a standard right now.

WALDEN: They're coming on the market at about the rate of forty to fifty a year, the latest figures that I have.

DOWNES: One wonders if we really need them in that quantity. I don't know. Maybe.

HUNTER: It becomes more and more difficult to police them, as more and more are introduced.

DOWNES: We'll be back in just a moment. First this message.

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DOWNNS: You know, our form of government is still crude... Industry, government, and the consumer. Industry does what we ask it to do, we the consumer; government does what we tell it to do; and it is up to the consumer not to abdicate his responsibility. And this is why it's important to keep all these things....

(COMMERCIAL INTERRUPTION AT THIS POINT DISPLACES PROGRAM)