Practicing medicine on a cereal box

Not so long ago, when life was simple, food and drugs were separate entities. Food was something you ate and drugs were the things you had trouble liberating from childhood bottles.

Then the Kellogg Co. came along and advertised All-Bran cereal with "news about cancer you can live with." The good folks from Battle Creek reminded consumers that eating fiber — such as is found in All-Bran — is among the recommendations of the National Cancer Institute for preventing colon and rectal cancer. Now other food marketers are making similar, if lesser, health-related claims. General Foods Corp., for instance, talks about how bran in its Post cereals "keeps your digestive system running smoothly."

The resulting raging controversy and genuine soul-searching at the Food and Drug Administration, the Advertising & Marketing
BY ROBERT GARFIELD

"We are concerned about what the long-range implications of this sort of thing are," says Dr. Allan L. Forbes, director of nutrition and food sciences at the FDA's Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition.

"Is it a good idea to enter an era where you practice medicine on the back of a cereal box?"

The FDA is likely to act on the matter within a month, but the agency remains uncomfortable — even downright edgy — about the issue.

Should it so choose, it could end such advertising and labeling abruptly by charging Kellogg under the Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act. Kellogg's ads easily could be interpreted as illegal, either for misleading consumers into thinking All-Bran is a sure-fire anti-cancer agent, or for discussing the prevention issue, period: By law, only registered drugs may be marketed as preventatives.

In other cases involving health claims the FDA has been hard-nosed. It sought and won indictment last year, alleging that General Nutrition Inc. marketed oil of evening primrose as a treatment for hypertension, arthritis and multiple sclerosis.

But Kellogg's case and its offshoots aren't nearly so tidy. Among the complications:

Carol Crawford, director of the Federal Trade Commission's Bureau of Consumer Protection, has praised Kellogg's effort. "We applaud Kellogg and the NCI for their cooperative approach," she said.

Dr. Edward Brandt Jr., who was assistant secretary for health in the Department of Health and Human Services before leaving government service Jan. 1, took the same tack.

Though the National Academy of Sciences says it has found insufficient evidence of dietary fiber's effectiveness in cancer prevention, the National Cancer Institute endorses fiber consumption and loves the Kellogg campaign.

The FDA more or less opened the Pandora's box from which the anti-cancer ads have sprung.


Then the FDA joined consumer advocates in encouraging marketers to provide nutritional information on labels, which in turn led to low-calorie and low-sodium claims — all, in effect, health claims. Even when Campbell Soup Co. three years ago began promoting its soups on the basis of nutrients per calorie — a sometimes irrelevant calculation that Campbell's finally withdrew under fire from consumer advocates — the FDA wasn't much alarmed.

"Everything was going along just dandily, in our opinion," Forbes says. "But the ball game has up and changed."

"What do we do now?" he asks. "I don't know what we're going to do."
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ADVERTISING & MARKETING

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