

Doctor Sour on Artificial Sweetener

(Editor's Note: The following letter is a response to an advertisement claiming the artificial sweetener Aspartame is as safe as mother's milk.)

Dear Honorable Deborah Platt Majoras [Chairman of the U.S. Federal Trade Commission],

I am enclosing a copy of the full-page ad by Ajinomoto that appeared in the November 2004 edition of *Functional Foods & Nutraceuticals*. It is titled, "Remember your first taste of aspartame?" The companion photo depicts an infant feeding at its mother's breast.

The promo begins: "mothers' milk doesn't contain aspartame, but it might as well. Aspartame is made from things which occur in larger quantities in other parts of our diet, and our bodies digest it completely naturally." It concludes: "The principal components of aspartame are two building blocks of protein, just like those found in eggs, fruit, cheese or fish—and even in mothers' milk."

In my opinion—as a corporate-neutral physician who has extensively researched and published on "aspartame disease" for two decades—this constitutes potentially dangerous deceptive misrepresentation. The chief reasons are (1) omission of other major components of aspartame, especially the 10% free methyl alcohol (methanol), (2) the profound adverse effects of the large amounts of its "two building blocks of protein" on neurotransmitters and other important systems, and (3) the absence of any reference to the terrible reactions induced by aspartame products in numerous infants and children.

I have extensively detailed these issues in several books, more than a score of medical/scientific publications, testimony to the U.S. Senate and an FDA advisory group, and my summarized professional opinion about the unwise use of aspartame products by pregnant women, infants, and children. The testimony, "position paper," a brochure of *Aspartame Disease: An Ignored Epidemic*, and my professional credentials are enclosed. The 1,000-page book reviews only the first 1,200 aspartame reactors in my data base (It now exceeds 1,400.)

I do not know in how many periodicals this ad has appeared. The potential adverse public health consequences from such promotion are enormous. . . based on the documented medical, neurological, psychological, metabolic, immune, genetic, and carcinogenic effects of aspartame and its breakdown products. As a relevant point, I cite several breast-feeding infants who develop convulsions while their mothers drank a "diet" soda.

I am grateful for our First Amendment; I nevertheless believe that the power of the federal government to regulate interstate commerce and advertising must be invoked here. This includes (1) halting such ads aimed specifically and unfairly at infants and children because they are misleading "in a material respect," (2) demanding corrective ads that underscore the risks of aspartame products, and (3) totally removing aspartame products from the market as an imminent health threat.

Let me express thanks for your interest and prompt attention to this profound matter in view of the inevitable corporate and political resistance such action will generate. But you must protect our children before it is too late!

Sincerely,

H. J. Roberts, M.D., F.A.C.P., F.C.C.P.

Artificial Sweetener Under Fire

False advertising lawsuits are mounting against chemical sweetener manufacturer Johnson & Johnson/McNeil for claims made about its chlorinated artificial sweetener Splenda®. Five separate lawsuits across the United States have been filed thus far—three state Consumer Class Action suits and two independent federal suits.

The complaints focus on violations of the Federal Lanham Act and violations of Florida and California statutes, all of which are designed to protect consumers against misleading corporate statements. All complaints allege deceptive and/or misleading representations made by Johnson & Johnson/McNeil in advertisements and marketing terminology in order to attract customers to purchase and consume the artificial sweetener Splenda®.

In its advertisements and on its product packaging, Splenda® claims that it "is made from sugar, so it tastes like sugar." According to the suits, statements like this mislead consumers into thinking that Splenda® is natural sugar without calories. In fact, Splenda® is not natural and may not taste like sugar. The sweetness of Splenda® derives from a chlorocarbon chemical that contains three atoms of chlorine in every one of its molecules.

Canada Warns Against SSRIs During Pregnancy

Health Canada, the Canadian equivalent of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), as issued a public advisory. In August 2004, the agency warned that newborns could be harmed if their mothers were taking a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI), or a newer (atypical) antidepressant during the third trimester of pregnancy.

The advisory applied to Wellbutrin® and Zyban® (bupropion), Celexa® (citalopram), Prozac® (fluoxetine), Luvox® (fluvoxamine), Remeron® (mirtazapine), Paxil® (paroxetine), Zoloft® (sertraline), and Effexor® (venlafaxine).

Health Canada said that some newborns whose mothers took these drugs during pregnancy had experienced certain birth complications that required extended hospital stays, breathing support, and feeding tubes.

The reported symptoms are consistent with recorded adverse and withdrawal effects of the drugs.

Two months before Health Canada issued the warning, the FDA gathered experts to review the effects of the drugs and agreed that product labels and package labels needed to be changed to reflect the new dangers.

The FDA declined to issue a public health advisory, fearing that it would scare mothers and keep them from taking their medication. The agency instead opted to educate physicians on the potential risks to newborns.

Teenager on Antidepressants Found Guilty of Murder

In Charleston, South Carolina, a 15-year-old boy named Chris Pittman was sentenced to 30 years in prison for killing his grandparents. The defense attorneys argued that the boy was led to kill his grandparents because of ill effects from the antidepressant sertraline (Zoloft®).

The prosecution stated that the drug defense was a "smoke screen" and that the case was not about drugs at all but about the actual crime committed.

Prosecutors claim that the child killed his grandparents because of a disagreement over a punishment they gave him for fighting on the school bus. He had previously threatened suicide and was prescribed Zoloft® three weeks before the killing. His dose was doubled just two days before he murdered his grandparents.

Dr. Lanette Atkins, a lawyer for the defense, said that the defendant had heard voices that told him to kill" in the days leading up to the murder. Another defense psychiatrist said that the defendant "did not have the ability" to have any criminal intentions because of the prescription drug.

Zoloft® had been ordered to carry "black-box" warnings by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration—the government's strongest warning short of a ban—because of the possibility that it might increase the risk of suicidal behavior in children.

Forest Laboratories—the maker of the antidepressant Lexapro®—recently announced that a study done in 2002 found that the drug was ineffective in children and adolescents. The announcement came months after researchers discovered that medical studies are often altered to obtain particular desired results.

Celexa®, another Forest antidepressant, contains the same active ingredient as Lexapro® and is often prescribed for pediatric patients.

Radio Identification Tags Used on Children

Brittan Elementary School, a rural grade school in Sutter, California, is requiring students to wear radiofrequency identification badges (RFIDs) that can track their every move. The devices were introduced in January 2005. They are programmed to the same radiofrequency and scanner technology that is used by livestock companies to keep track of inventory.

Parents and civil libertarians are fighting the school, saying that the badges rob the children of privacy and that the technology might even endanger the children if the badges are read by the wrong people.

The RFID badges are worn around the child's neck. When the children pass under an antenna posted in the classrooms, the child's information is beamed to a teacher's hand-held computer display.

The system began without parental consent or advice, as a way to simplify attendance taking and to reduce vandalism.

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