

Saccharin ban: A sour reception

On March 9, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration proposed a ban on the sale of the only artificial sweetener on the American market—saccharin—to start later this year. Its decision was based primarily on a Canadian rat experiment that showed that saccharin could cause bladder tumors. The FDA had no choice but to propose a ban under the Delaney clause in the 1958 food additives amendments to the U.S. Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act. The clause prohibits the use of chemicals in American-produced foods that have caused cancer in either animals or people, and it requires banning from the market any food additive that has triggered cancer in animals or people.

The pending ban has created a furor among many Americans. It is having a major impact on artificial-sweetener, soft-drink and other manufacturers who use saccharin, and it is putting some people temporarily out of work. It also raises some poignant questions about the science and law under which the FDA operates and whether Americans' individual rights are being infringed upon by government.

The major experiment on which the FDA has based its decision was performed by the Health Protection Branch of the Canadian government. Saccharin was fed to 100 rats as 7 percent of their diet (comparable to a human consuming 800 cans of diet drink daily). Of these animals, three developed bladder tumors. Of their offspring, exposed before birth, 14 percent incurred bladder cancer. This study, as well as several others conducted by the FDA itself, led it to invoke, on March 9, the Delaney clause.

Since then Americans have been bombarding the FDA with calls of protest; some of them have been in tears. They are also hoarding sugar-free soft drinks and artificial sweeteners. A spokesman for the American Diabetes Association has warned that the nonavailability of sugar substitutes could have "very grave effects" on America's 10 million diabetics. The Calorie Control Council, representing the diet-food industry, has run a two-page ad in various newspapers, explaining "why the proposed ban on saccharin is leaving a bad taste in lots of people's mouths," accusing the ban of being "another example of the arbitrary nature of big government" and encouraging readers to protest to their congressmen.

As for the impact of the proposed ban on industry, Coca-Cola Co. and Pepsico, Inc., will be changing their low-calorie drinks so that they have a higher calorie content. Abbott Laboratories, the maker of Sucaryl, a saccharin sweetener, may fight the ban. The Cumberland Packing Corp., the manufacturer of Sweet 'n Low,

a saccharin sweetener, has halted production for the time being, putting 500 workers in Brooklyn, 100 in Miami and 100 in Los Angeles on vacation. Blammo, America's most advertised sugar-free gum, will go on without saccharin.

Is there any scientific rationale to the FDA's decision? Scientists close to the chemical carcinogenesis scene point out that there is. Substances like saccharin cannot be properly tested on humans. For one reason, it would take up to half a person's lifetime for many cancer-causing chemicals to produce tumors. Second, one would then have to kill the human subjects after a set time to look for tumors during autopsy. Therefore researchers usually use short-lived small mammals for chemical carcinogenesis experiments. Yet even here there are some difficulties. Cancer-causing chemicals, at realistic levels of exposure, may produce tumors in only a small percentage of animals. Thus researchers would have to use many such animals to indict a chemical carcinogen. Investigators generally compromise by testing a small number of such animals by dosing them with a suspected chemical in far greater amounts than they, or humans, would ordinarily be exposed to. This way, they believe, they can get an idea of what the chemical would do in lesser amounts to more animals. They also assume that large doses of a cancer-causing chemical reflect what the chemical would do at lower levels over a period of time. And contrary to common belief, most chemicals do *not* trigger cancer, no matter how high the dose.

On the other hand, in its 80 years of use in the United States, saccharin has never been demonstrated to trigger bladder cancer in people. Nor has it produced cancer in primates massively dosed with saccharin over a period of years. What's more, banning the only available noncaloric sweetener on the market is bound to encourage Americans to eat more refined sugar, which also carries its own health risks—dental caries, enhancement of a hereditary predisposition to diabetes and obesity, which in turn may encourage heart disease or cancer of the bowels.

With no definite proof that saccharin causes cancer in humans, then, the question arises of whether people should be able to eat what they like. Critics of the action point out that people are allowed to smoke cigarettes, and cigarettes, unlike saccharin, have been indicted as human cancer-causers. On the other hand, it was Congress that legislated the Delaney clause, and if Americans are not happy with it, it is up to them to encourage their congressmen to change the law.

The probable outcome of the proposed ban is not clear. The Delaney clause may be changed. Or saccharin may be reclassified as a drug, since drugs are not covered by the clause. Or perhaps a new sweetener will be approved for marketing; some are already waiting in the wings. □

Research dives probe the Galapagos Rift

An exciting and significant field of scientific exploration in the last four years has been a series of expeditions taking researchers down in submersibles to witness firsthand the centers of seafloor spreading where giant crustal plates, on which the continents and oceans ride, are slowly growing. Such observations were made on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge in 1974 and the Cayman Trough near Cuba in early 1976.

Now the first half of a near-identical series of dives has been completed to the Galapagos Rift in the Pacific Ocean west of northern South America. A record 11 dives in 11 days were made in the 23-foot submersible *Alvin*. Further observations were made by a camera sled towed by the surface vessel *Knorr*.

Scientists from Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution and other institutions diving to the Galapagos Rift in the *Alvin* report that they examined in detail several hot water vents on the deep ocean floor. The Mid-Atlantic Ridge, the Cayman Trough and the Galapagos Rift are all areas of spreading, where new volcanic material wells up from the earth's interior, and bulbous "pillow" structures some 30 centimeters across, plus relatively flat flows of lava, are typical. But according to Woods Hole, the Galapagos work represents the first observations of active hot water vents emerging from holes in pillow lava. The holes are "about the size of a cereal bowl."

Richard Von Herzen, just returned to Woods Hole after serving as chief scientist on board the *Knorr* during the first half of the expedition, says he believes the ease of finding the vents may be due to the relatively flat topography of the area. On the Mid-Atlantic Ridge there were mountains two kilometers high, but the highest elevation in the Galapagos is about 200 meters.

The current hypothesis for the vents, which were first spotted last summer in photographs taken during survey work by the Scripps Institution of Oceanography research vessel *Melville*, is that there are large convection currents that move sea water down through sediment and rock layers, perhaps several kilometers into the ocean floor. There it is heated, and then it rises by percolating back up through the rock and sediment layers. The scientists have also found higher temperatures in a series of curious 20-meter-high mounds that occur in straight lines about 20 kilometers south of the rift. These mounds, says Von Herzen, are also believed to be related to such hydrothermal circulation.

Leading the observers to the hot water vents was the unusual presence—for these 2,700-meter depths—of large groups of