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# Better food habits, better health

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Consumer groups in the Philippines are prodding government, industry and the ordinary citizen into a new awareness of the importance of good quality foodstuffs for the nation's health

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by Ruth Seitz

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**H**ealth-minded consumer groups are taking positive steps to persuade citizens in the Philippines to buy healthful and nutritive goods in the shops. At the same time, they are also impressing the providers of goods and services with the need for high standards of safety and quality.

Their aims are broader than those of consumerism in the industrialized world. Mary John Mananzan, a nun who heads the Manila-based Citizens' Alliance for Consumer Protection (CACCP) explains: "We won't tackle the quality of toilet paper or bacon. Rather we choose issues that affect the majority of our population, the poor." The Alliance addresses the 70 per cent of people who have neither the time, knowledge or connections to fill the role of a present-day consumer activist. CACCP's survey of 600 urban families who are dependent on casual work revealed that the daily incomes of both

spouses totalled 19 pesos (US \$2.50), which is less than the minimum wage.

"When a consumer's purchasing power is low," says Dr N.V. Nair, who's Western Pacific Regional Adviser on Nutrition, "it is not easy to sell the nutrition message. Education can help a consumer to get the best for his or her peso, but big changes have to be brought about by applying economic constraints through food subsidies, income-generating projects and controlled pricing."

Today in the Philippines, consumer education is tackling two levels—both the individual purchasing patterns and the international issues which relate to products on offer and consumer power. For example, a poster competition on breastfeeding is accompanied by a boycott of all the products of a transnational company which promotes infant formula without complying with WHO's recommendations on breastmilk substitutes.



*A wide range of snacks, almost entirely devoid of nutritive value, entice consumers in thousands of little sari-sari (variety) stores like this throughout the Philippines.*

*(Photo B. Seitz ©)*

Campaigns against completion of the country's first nuclear power plant focus on the potential health hazards of such activity in an earthquake zone, and also publicise the industrialized world's willingness to foist a product of declining popularity on to Third World soil. Many residents fear that the nuclear plant's run-off water will adversely affect the ocean fish, their daily protein supply and the fish called *jalungong* which are trawled for the sardine-canning industry.

In home discussion groups, consumers learn herbal remedies for common ailments and also the names of drugs that have been banned in many countries but may still be easily available in a





Third World pharmacy. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) of the Ministry of Health urges consumers to file complaints against retailers who sell prescription-only drugs over the counter.

At school assemblies, the children are warned against packaged snacks, devoid of calories, and learn that these imported food ideas have replaced more natural foodstuffs such as fruits and rice cakes.

"Is Your Stomach a Junkyard?"—the message flashes on a screen before more than 200 Filipino high-school children. The punchy slide show contrasts nutritious, body-building foods with snacks to munch that only fill the stomach. The students learn that a bottle of soft drink is 99 per cent water and sugar with a sprinkling of acids, colouring and flavouring. The equivalent of seven teaspoonfuls of sugar is the source of its energising effect, explains Rey Teves, director of Konsumo Dabao, an active

consumer group in Davao City in the southern Philippines.

Davao's residents consume millions of bottles of soft drink every day. Teves is convinced that drinking soft drinks has become a habit for Filipinos only because it's fun and convenient—and the advertisements have said so. "It's an artificial need", he informs the students. "Take it from a former six-bottle-a-day person. I've learned that water is just fine."

With technical data from the Nutritionists' and Dieticians' Association, Konsumo's Anti-Junk Food Campaign reaches consumers through a mobile exhibit, educational programmes at numerous schools and broadcasts from the city's seven radio stations.

"Besides being combative", explains Teves, "we must protect consumers by promoting an alternative lifestyle." Konsumo has introduced "fruity milk" at

school canteens. Mango, avocado, banana or pineapple is whipped in a blender with milk, sugar and egg and then frozen in slender plastic bags. These snacks are more nutritious than the usual "iced candies" made of sweetened artificially-flavoured water.

A factory canteen was the first to offer tangerine-juice squeezed fresh. The vendor used her time and energy because she believes "in the health value of natural fruit compared with soft drinks". Such experimental efforts help to wean consumers' tastes. Unfortunately, soft drinks are the least expensive commercial beverage in the Philippines, while the cost of fruit juice in tins and cartons is prohibitive for the poor.

Many low-income earners still strive to buy evaporated milk, and about 69 per cent of bottle-fed infants receive it. When lead to a level of 10.95 parts per million showed up in one 14-ounce tin in





1978, the public was aroused. (Both WHO and FDA recommend 0.50 ppm as the maximum level of this product.) "Their fear of contamination caused them to impose a boycott", explained Julia Amargo, director of Kilusan ng mga Mamimili ng Pilipinas, Ink (KMPI)—which means Philippines Consumers Movement, Inc. A vanguard protection group, KMPI financed the testing of major brands of tinned milk and publicised the results. The 1978 lead controversy was an indication of the maturing of consumerism in the Philippines.

For more than a decade, product-testing has been KMPI's main contribution. After anonymously purchasing goods over the counter as any citizen does, KMPI has the samples analysed in "reputable, reliable government and university laboratories". An evaluation committee consisting of volunteer scientists and technologists assesses the results before they are published in KMPI's popular magazine, *Ang Mamimili (The Consumer)*.

Test results inform consumers whether products are meeting government regulations for safety and quality. Many of these standards are determined by the detailed guidelines on food, drug and cosmetic preparation published in the

*Codex Alimentarius* of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

For *patis* or fish sauce, an essential condiment in Philippine cooking, FDA standards call for a protein content of not less than 4.5 per cent in regular varieties. Of the 16 brands which KMPI tested, only two met the minimum requirements.

WHO's Dr Nair admits that there is often a vast gap between existing standards and their enforcement, because Third World countries do not have the facilities, staff or finances to monitor all the products marketed. "It is difficult and time-consuming to police the manufacturing. When companies do their own, they pass the costs on to the consumer." He adds that, in developing nations, "private consumer groups hold a valid role in informing and thus safeguarding the public".

Two potentially helpful changes are in prospect—a proposed consumer code which is under study in a National Assembly committee and a strengthening of the FDA which would double its budget and widen its enforcing powers.

"The consumer's best protection is his or her own education as a buyer", Julia Amargo affirms. KMPI receives an average of one consumer complaint every

*A woman chemist at the Food and Nutrition Research Institute checks on the caloric content of a popular sweetened soft-drink.*

Facing page: *These girls at the same Institute are tasting "cookies" under rigorous test conditions—to ensure that they are acceptable for public sale.* (Photos B. Seitz ©)

two days and, when funds are adequate, resolves 85 per cent of them in favour of the buyer.

Coordination among government and private organizations effectively exposed the prevalent danger of aflatoxin in commercial peanut butter. After KMPI publicised the findings of the Food and Nutrition Research Institute (FNRI)—8,600 parts per billion when FAO's recommended maximum level is 30 ppb—WHO gave additional data and FDA ordered the manufacturers to improve their processing. One company set up its own laboratory to monitor the toxin level, and now the count among major brand is "considerably reduced".

Dr Nair explains the need for vigilance against aflatoxins, which cause primary liver cancer in sub-human primates. "A consumer cannot know if a food is contaminated, even though mould is sometimes an indicator." Only 58 per cent of 1,400 strains of fungal mould produce





aflatoxin, but contamination may be present even if the item seems fit for eating.

"Corn is easily contaminated here", he adds. FNRI research shows that in the Central Visayas, the highest corn-consuming area of the Philippines, 15.6 per cent of all malignancies are liver cancers, whereas in Ilocos, the lowest corn-consuming region, the incidence of liver cancer was only 5.2 per cent.

"With three-quarters of the population living in rural areas, where the majority of food is not sold in processed, packaged form, there is a need to include the prevention of aflatoxin contamination in nutrition education", Dr Nair points out. Drying harvested grain immediately and rapidly hinders moulds from growing. Root crops, such as peanuts, should be kept out of contact with moist soil. The use of fungicides during storage should be accompanied by consumer education on how to get rid of them before the foodstuffs are eaten. Cooperation among the agriculture, trade and manufacturing sectors can help to reduce a widespread problem that militates against food safety.

FNRI's Director, Dr Josefina Bulatao-Jayme, feels that consumers should also know that there is a high incidence of aflatoxin in cassava and fish products, and

that rice, the daily staple food, is not immune.

Food and nutrition study-action groups from the consumer organizations garner their research findings to use in education. FNRI's information department distributes valuable specifics on the nutrients of local foods. For instance, the richness in vitamins and iron of *malunggay* leaves has made them a top-ranking vegetable. Although their iron content is almost double that of an egg, the latter is more totally absorbed by the body because it is an animal iron. Dr Bulatao-Jayme warns against promoting one single food too heavily. "If people tire of it, they will stop eating. It's better to push a variety."

But she observes that it's not enough to say "eat vegetables"; eggplant, which people tend to prefer, does not contain valuable nutrients. Convincing Filipinos to eat green and yellow vegetables, the brighter the better, is an unending task for the nutritionists.

Consisting almost one-quarter of protein, *munggo* (mung bean) is an excellent meat substitute in conjunction with rice. It is not as protein-rich as soy, but since this legume pleases the Philippine palate, it can be eaten in large amounts. FNRI's data sheets recommend soaking the

beans in boiling water for two hours and then simmering them until soft. Since cooking reduces the protein content by half, rapid boiling should be avoided.

Unfortunately the price of *munggo* has soared as a result of its promotion as a nutritious food. *Dilis*, a small fish lauded for the calcium its bones provide, has also increased in price by 258 per cent over the past eight years—mainly because it is tagged as nutritious. But by pressing for controlled pricing and co-operative marketing, consumers groups can help to keep nutritious food within reach of the poor.

Low-income consumers, by the same token, must feel a need for such foods. The education task is a massive one. Out of ten essential purchases listed by the poor families surveyed by the Citizens' Alliance for Consumer Protection, soft drinks were listed number one, with beer and cigarettes running close behind.

By making use of available research and prodding industry and government, the consumer groups can potentially raise the health of the public. Health awareness will undoubtedly pay off—as it did for one mother, who attributes her children's last two cavity-free visits to the dentist to their cutting out soft drinks from the family budget. ■



