

cial deference to the other branches of government? Books like *The Art of Judging* and *The Supreme Court's Constitution* can help us understand the choices that judges face. The ultimate role of the judiciary, however, will depend primarily on the judicial philosophy of the men and women who survive an increasingly political confirmation process.

Fear Itself

Consuming Fears: The Politics of Product Risks, ed. Harvey M. Sapolsky (Basic Books, 1986), 241 pp.

Reviewed by Elizabeth M. Whelan

Americans live in fear. We suffer from a debilitating condition called nosophobia.

Nosophobics are everywhere. They dominate the airwaves and the electronic media. They labor for self-appointed consumer advocacy groups. They have infiltrated high-level government offices and advisory committees.

In case you are having trouble recalling what nosophobia is, it is like hypochondria, but with a difference. Hypochondriacs think they are sick. Nosophobics think they will get sick because of factors lurking in their diet and general environment. For nosophobics, living in the United States in 1988 is inherently hazardous to your health.

A new book, *Consuming Fears: The Politics of Product Risks*, helps us to understand why so many Americans—among the healthiest, most affluent, best-educated people in the world—live in anxiety about the alleged harmful effects of foods and other consumer products.

Consumers have been barraged with "health risks" for the past 20 years. First came Rachel Carson's environmental polemic, *Silent Spring*, followed by warnings about cyclamates, saccharin, nitrite, caffeine, and cholesterol. Each of these, the consumer has been told, can cause cancer, heart disease, or other chronic illnesses. And merely watching what we eat and drink isn't enough—Love Canal and Three Mile Island taught us that. We have been threatened with cancer, miscarriage, and every other illness and

misfortune. The final result is that the public cannot distinguish the real risks from the noisy background, and may become completely inured to risk: if everything is dangerous, then nothing seems to be.

Editor Harvey Sapolsky and his contributors sympathize with the bewildered consumer. They recognize that industry is multifaceted, frequently indifferent to what is good science and what is not, and often motivated by one interest: the bottom line. Government agencies and the press often add to the consumer's confusion.

Consuming Fears offers a detailed account of the politics of product risk for six major products: cigarettes, dairy and meat products, salt, artificial sweeteners, tampons, and urea-formaldehyde insulation. Rightly or wrongly, each of these products has been linked in the public eye with serious disease. The authors provide thorough analyses of the scientific evidence on alleged health effects, and thoughtful discussions of the various factors and groups influencing decision making. The book provides an educational journey into the complexities of the politics of consumer safety.

The contributors do an excellent job of political fact-finding. Each of the six chapters could stand alone as an historical record of the events surrounding a number of controversies. Together, they underscore a phenomenon which has received far too little attention: the assault on the consumer's consciousness by a full spectrum of so-called hazards.

While most of the chapters are fair-to-excellent, there are a few serious weaknesses in the book. For one thing, the bewildered consumer cannot use the book to gauge relative risks. In the ordering of the chapters, for example, artificial sweeteners are ranked as more dangerous than tampons. Yet artificial sweeteners have caused no known deaths, while tampons have contributed to about 50 cases of toxic shock syndrome annually—and TSS has a 12 percent death rate.

As a related matter, the book fails to make clear that we *voluntarily* expose ourselves to the majority of the carcinogenic chemical hazards that we encounter in our environment. For example, Sapolsky notes that, "environmental scientists claim that 40 to 80 percent of [cancer] is attributable to chemical hazards, whereas biomedical researchers see lifestyle factors as more important." Unfortunately most people do not realize that the two groups overlap. And it would

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be impossible to glean from this passage that 35 percent of cancer mortality in the United States is directly linked to cigarette smoking, perhaps 3 percent to occupational exposures, and something less than this to alcohol abuse, overexposure to sunlight or radiation, and specific sexual and reproductive patterns. As many as 30 percent of cancers may be related to diet, but which part of the diet is unknown.

The weakest chapter in the book is on smoking. Written by the editor, the chapter has a tone of admiration for a much put-upon industry that has somehow managed to outwit its enemies for years. While other authors write about "evidence," "studies," and "research," Sapolsky speaks of "claims" and "health scares." When writing about the product liability suits being filed by smokers and their families, he describes these suits as "the American way to get even (and perhaps rich as well). . . ." When writing about the designation of cigarette smoking as an addictive disease by officials at the Alcohol, Drug Abuse and Mental Health Administration, he implies that cigarettes are not *really* addictive; they have just been so labeled for political reasons. Yet studies have shown that nicotine can be more addictive than many narcotic drugs. He accords little respect for people who wish to breathe smoke-free air. In his words: "The intent [of the nonsmokers' rights movement] is to make

the smoker a pariah, shunned by others and plagued by self-doubts. . . . The claim is that tobacco smoke endangers the health of exposed nonsmokers." Sapolsky is candid about the fact that Philip Morris provided the grant for this book. In this chapter, I think it shows.

As a basic primer on the history of tobacco smoking and the tobacco industry, Sapolsky's chapter is good. However, there are more objective sources of this information.

In the chapter entitled "The Politics of Diet and Heart Disease," Janet M. Levine explores what happened when the Food and Nutrition Board's report, *Toward Healthful Diets*, challenged the conventional wisdom about reducing dietary cholesterol and saturated fats in the hopes of preventing or postponing heart disease. Levine discusses the extensive publicity surrounding the report, and its impact on public understanding. She carefully reviews the scientific evidence on the topic and the various critiques of the report. She also discusses the political interests at stake, painting a clear picture of the brouhaha that resulted.

Levine ends with the disquieting conclusion that the lack of government involvement in this instance has left the public with (presumably only) those interpretations of scientific evidence that suit the market needs of the food industry. This conclusion is unwarranted. Levine over-

looks, for example, the growing cadre of qualified science writers seeking new information who bypass industry to get scientific evidence out to the media. Levine apparently believes that government action is also necessary to ensure the accuracy of public information on health prevention. Certainly this assumption is open to challenge.

Mark J. Segal tackles the sodium-hypertension issue, which is nearly as complicated as diet and heart disease. In "The Politics of Salt," he reviews the scientific and medical grounds for concern. Continued research has shown that sodium's role in creating hypertension is far from clear. Indeed, it has been demonstrated that low-sodium diets are of little value for the population as a whole. Segal also examines the regulatory and marketing battles over salt, focussing on salt in baby foods.

The chapter provides a detailed and fascinating look at how scientific concerns have influenced public policy. Segal concludes that the sodium-hypertension issue, while essentially coming to nothing in itself, has "set the stage for widespread interest in rather esoteric scientific and regulatory challenges."

The politics of artificial sweeteners is examined by Linda C. Cummings, who documents the regulatory trials and tribulations of cyclamates, saccharin, and aspartame. She does a good job of describing the difficult route of these products from lab bench to supermarket shelf, and of dissecting the factors creating the national dependence on artificial sweeteners.

Cummings also examines the politics of the various sweetener bans. The role of interest groups (including the sugar industry, the American Diabetes Association, the Juvenile Diabetes Foundation, and the food industry) is explored. Cummings highlights the repeated challenges to aspartame's safety, analyzing both the economic and scientific aspects of those challenges. Unfortunately Cummings' conclusions are weaker than her analysis.

Sanford L. Weiner tackles the question of the link between tampons and toxic shock syndrome. In this case a new public health threat arose, and within four months led to a multi-million dollar recall that Weiner believes may have been pointless. Like a detective, he reconstructs the story from the point at which the disease was documented, noting questionable aspects of the data, and thereby suggesting questions about the actions later taken. He does

a particularly good job discussing the pressures on Procter & Gamble to voluntarily recall Rely tampons after they were epidemiologically linked to TSS. (He also discusses the subsequent research showing that Rely is not particularly more risky than other brands of tampons, and that menstruating women are far from the only people at risk of TSS.) His analysis of the individuals, the policies, and the departments, plus their interactions, is revealing. Weiner concludes by questioning whether the public has been left with understanding or confusion about the tampon-TSS link, suggesting that confusion reigns.

In another chapter, Weiner turns to urea-formaldehyde foam insulation. This case is interesting because, as Weiner points out, four federal agencies have looked at almost the same evidence and each has drawn a strikingly different conclusion: the Department of Housing and Urban Development settled for a mild standard for mobile homes; the Occupational Safety and Health Administration changed its mind twice about standards for formaldehyde resins in garment factories; the Environmental Protection Agency twice decided against getting involved at all; and the Consumer Product Safety Commission decided to ban the insulation entirely.

Unfortunately Weiner makes some errors in explaining the dynamics of formaldehyde outgassing. Once safely beyond this difficult subject, though, he does a fine job of describing the regulatory rough-and-tumble over urea-formaldehyde foam insulation. This makes fascinating reading.

Perhaps the most unfortunate limitation of *Consuming Fears* as a whole is that it suggests that the politics of consumer safety is driven by a two-way struggle, rather than a three-way struggle. The authors envision a Ralph Nader-type agitator, who sees a toxin under every pillow, and industry, a hydra-headed, profit-oriented entity. Largely ignored are the consumers themselves, who simply want the facts about the relative risks posed by their environment and the products they purchase.

Read *Consuming Fears* as a chronicle of the conflicting messages we have gotten over the last 20 years about diet, health, and the environment. You will become knowledgeable about the actors in various controversies, and perhaps even their motivations. But on a practical level, don't expect to end up with anything more than a renewed respect for a piece of age-old advice: "Let the buyer beware."