How Do We Know Our Food is Safe?

Ruben Holguin

If you were a parent in the 19th century, and your baby was colicky or teething, you might have bought Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup. This remedy really worked! Mr. H. A. Alger from Lowell, Massachusetts, wrote to the *New York Times* in 1860, that his son had been suffering greatly due to teething. But when he gave him Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup, the "effect was like magic." His baby fell right to sleep; all his "pain and nervousness disappeared."

It turns out, each dose of this miracle product contained 65 grams of morphine, as well as alcohol and other chemicals that could cause coma, addiction, and death in an infant. No wonder the baby fell right to sleep!

Government Regulation

How did such a dangerous product get sold to unsuspecting consumers?

Back in the 19th century, there were no strong laws or federal agencies to regulate the products put on the market. The government felt that it was the consumer's responsibility to buy food and drugs that were safe. However, many people disagreed. They felt that the manufacturers of the product needed to be held to certain standards. For example, the Ladies Health Association began organizing to force owners to clean up unsanitary slaughterhouses. They helped lead a grassroots movement of people called the Pure Foods Movement. Their efforts pressured Congress to pass the Pure Food and Drugs Act of 1906. This law made it the government's responsibility to test for "adulteration" and "misbranding" of food and drugs.

In 1930, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) took on the role of protecting the public health by assuring the safety, efficacy, and security of human and veterinary drugs, biological products, medical devices, food, cosmetics, and products that emit radiation. To this day, the FDA continues to work to make sure that food and drugs made in the USA or imported from other countries are safe to eat and are free from contamination or viruses that can make us sick.

How does it work?

Before the FDA approves products for consumers, it has steps to follow to make sure that all products are safe. Let's say a company wants to sell sugar. The company would send their product to the FDA for testing. The FDA looks for any contamination or viruses that may cause the consumer harm. If the FDA finds high levels of dangerous chemicals, for example, then the FDA tells the company that it needs to reduce the amount of that chemical or their product will not be approved by the FDA. If the FDA agrees that the product is okay, then the product can have a label saying it is "FDA-approved." The company must then follow FDA guidelines for how it ships and handles its products to ensure that the product remains safe and free of con-

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tamination. Failure to follow the FDA guidelines will result in a recall of the product, which means the product must be called back for the FDA to inspect and potentially throw away.

The FDA is a great example of how the government can help protect the public's safety by regulating and testing the food and drugs we consume. Imagine if we each individually had the headache of testing and being sure every single product we consume is safe!

Can We Trust It?

However, the public has to beware! The FDA does not have a perfect record of defending the public's interests. For example, some of FDA officials have connections with the very corporations they are supposed to be regulating. Often, food and drug companies will offer high-paying jobs to FDA officials—giving them the incentive to keep the companies' interests in mind. Since 1992, the FDA has agreed with multinational corporations like Monsanto that it is not necessary to require labeling of genetically engineered foods. More than 60 countries in the world require corporations to let consumers know if they are eating genetically engineered food, but the U.S. does not. A 2004 article in the *New York Times* showed strong ties between the FDA and the drug industry and argued that the FDA has become less effective at monitoring dangerous drugs.

What can you do?

It was grassroots organizations like the Ladies Health Association that helped force the government to regulate our food. The same kind of pressure is what we need now to make sure the food and drug manufacturers are fairly regulated and consumers are protected. What can you do?

1. Research local groups that are working on consumer protection issues.
2. Learn about the Genetically Altered Food Right-to-Know Act <www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/113/hr1699> and contact your legislators to let them know how you feel about it.
3. Learn about what is really in our food and other products so that you can make educated decisions about what to eat: <www.ewg.org>.

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AFTER YOU READ:

1. According to this article, from the 19th to the 20th century, there was a shift in who was responsible for food safety. Explain the shift.
2. Evaluate the political cartoon. Start by saying what you see. What is the cartoonist's message?
3. What do you think? Whose responsibility is it to make sure our food is safe?
4. Learn more about genetically modified foods. See pp. 42-43.