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## Choose to remove trans fats

By Kelly D. Brownell and Walter C. Willett

When New York City's health commissioner, Dr. Thomas Frieden, recently proposed banning trans fats in restaurants and requiring many to post calories on menus, there was cause for celebration.

New York joins New Jersey, Chicago, Los Angeles and communities nationwide that are considering trans fat restrictions. All 18 restaurants in Tiburon (Marin County) stopped using trans fats voluntarily, as have a number of restaurants in New York. The change can be made without narrowing the choice of foods or affecting cost or taste. Even Disney, long known for licensing its characters to sell high-calorie foods, announced this week that its theme parks will be trans-fat free by the end of 2007, with its licensed products following suit by 2008.

A number of states have considered requiring calories to be listed on menus.

The response from the powerful and organized restaurant lobby, led by the National Restaurant Association, has been swift and is now predictable — the “food police” are restricting liberty and freedom.

Freedom really is the issue.

Consumers must know what is in their food to have true freedom of choice. That means labeling. Imagine buying food in the supermarket from manufacturers who withhold nutritional information. Would you know whether you were feeding your family healthy meals?

Restaurants are the new family table. The restaurant industry accounts for 47.5 percent of every food dollar, up from 25 percent in 1955. On a given day, more than 40 percent of adults eat out, many with children. Diet worsens when people eat out, increasing consumption of items like fried foods. One quarter of all vegetables Americans eat are French fries.

New York proposes to ban trans fat outright — much like leaded gasoline was banned. Americans can afford to be passionate about our right to make choices because we operate under the comforting assumption that truly dangerous products will be taken off the market.

Trans fats are truly dangerous. They raise “bad” cholesterol levels, lower “good” cholester-

ol, and increase inflammatory factors that contribute to heart disease and diabetes. Global research shows that the risk of death rises with increasing trans fat intake. Trans fats are responsible for at least 30,000 annual premature deaths in the United States from coronary heart disease, according to a Harvard School of Public Health study.

In 2005, at least one-third of New York's restaurants used trans fats. Frieden asked them to change voluntarily. This was hardly a call to take fried foods off menus; alternative oils are available. Yet after a yearlong robust campaign with the city's restaurants, little changed. If restaurants watched out for their customers, government wouldn't have to.

There is a strong basis for removing trans fats and requiring calorie labeling. These actions promote what Harvard economist David Laibson calls “optimal defaults” — conditions where the most likely action supports health and well-being. Parents are required to immunize children. There is fluoride in the water. Air bags deploy automatically. We have safe drinking water. Good health is maximized by default. In contrast, unhealthy eating has become the default — understandable, considering that portions are too large, nutrition information is rarely provided, and trans fats are omnipresent.

The restaurant industry counters with exaggerated claims that it will cost restaurant owners dearly to change; allegations that mom-and-pop restaurants will suffer; the specter of frivolous lawsuits if labels are not precisely accurate; statements that freedom is usurped; and cries that restaurants just want to offer choice.

In fact, consumers need not worry. Denmark banned trans fats in 2003, and not just in restaurants. The pastries are as flaky and the fries as crispy as ever, with consumers happy and not noticing a difference.

The New York battle may land in the courts. The industry may seek federal action to pre-empt the city, and it will be no surprise if the restaurant association launches a national effort to persuade legislators to limit such jurisdiction elsewhere. It will be important for our representatives to resist industry pressure.

Freedom and sound nutrition are good partners. Who among us would not choose simple reforms that improve our children's odds of having a long and healthy future?

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