

## US government rejects WHO's attempts to improve diet

Owen Dyer *London*

The US government has rejected a link between junk food and obesity in a confidential letter to the director general of the World Health Organization, Dr Lee Jong-wook.

The letter, from William Steiger, special assistant at the Department of Health and Human Services, has been leaked and is available on the internet. It is the United States's official response to an April 2003 report by WHO and the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) which argued that added sugar should comprise no more than 10% of a healthy diet and that governments should take steps to limit

children's exposure to the advertising of junk food.

When the report, *Diet, Nutrition, and the Prevention of Chronic Diseases*, was released last year (*BMJ* 2003;326:515), American food manufacturers' groups began lobbying to prevent their government from accepting its proposals. The Sugar Association wrote to Gro Harlem Brundtland, then director general of WHO, threatening to "exercise every avenue available to expose the dubious nature" of the report. Congressmen recruited by the food industry urged the secretary of health, Tommy Thompson, to cut off the \$406m (£226m; €334m) annual US contribution to WHO (*BMJ* 2003;326:948).

Groups such as the National Soft Drink Association, based in Washington, argue that 25% added sugar in the diet is not harmful. WHO counters that 23 countries have produced national reports that recommend limits of about 10%.

Professor Marion Nestle,

chairwoman of the department of food and nutrition studies at New York University, says US domestic guidelines are no different. "If you do the sums in the Department of Agriculture Food Guide Pyramid, you'll find it recommends 7-12% free sugars. But they're afraid to mention actual figures because of the industry, which is being very aggressive at the moment."

The leaked letter says that the WHO/FAO report fails to meet the standards of the US Data Quality Act, lacks external peer review, and mixes science and policy making in the same exercise. "Whenever you hear the government or the industry talking about scientific rigour," said Professor Nestle, "it's code for self interest."

Mr Steiger's letter questions the scientific basis for the "linking of fruit and vegetable consumption to decreased risk of obesity and diabetes." He adds: "There is an unsubstantiated focus on 'good' and 'bad' foods, and a conclusion that specific

foods are linked to non-communicable diseases and obesity... The assertion that heavy marketing of energy-dense foods or fast food outlets increases the risk of obesity is supported by almost no data."

Bruce Silverglade, legal affairs director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest in Washington, said that Mr Thompson will bring a delegation from the Grocery Manufacturers of America to Geneva this week, where a WHO executive board meeting is expected to approve the global strategy on diet, physical activity, and health.

"Publicly, Secretary Thompson offers lip service about fighting obesity, but privately he's flying to Geneva with a squad of lobbyists intent on undermining WHO's recommendations," said Mr Silverglade. □

The WHO report is at [www.who.int/hpr/NPH/docs/who\\_fao\\_expert\\_report.pdf](http://www.who.int/hpr/NPH/docs/who_fao_expert_report.pdf) and the leaked letter is at [www.commercialalert.org/bushadmincomment.pdf](http://www.commercialalert.org/bushadmincomment.pdf)

## Claim of human reproductive cloning provokes calls for international ban

Susan Mayor *London*

An international ban on reproductive cloning is urgently needed, say embryologists and organisations working in the field, after a claim last week that a fertilised egg produced by reproductive cloning had been implanted into a woman's uterus.

Panos Zavos, professor emeritus of reproductive physiology-andrology at the University of Kentucky, in the United States, claimed at a press conference held in London last week that he had implanted a cloned embryo into a woman's womb. He said that the embryo had been produced from the immature egg of an infertile 35 year old woman and a skin cell from her husband.

The procedure had taken place "very recently," he reported, and it was too early to see if implantation had been successful. He refused to give details of the national or racial origins of the couple involved and offered no proof that the procedure had taken place. But he said that it

had been filmed and that he would allow DNA testing to check his claims at a later date.

The announcement drew widespread condemnation from authorities and embryologists working in the field. It was suggested that an international ban—ideally led by the United Nations—on reproductive cloning should be introduced urgently. The United Nations was considering such a ban but decided in November 2003 to delay consideration of the issue for two years, until September 2005.

Suzi Leather, chairwoman of the HFEA (the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority, the government appointed organisation that regulates UK treatment and research involving human embryos outside the body), said: "Zavos's media stunt is more than just a stunt. It has demonstrated that there will always be someone who is willing to exploit patients and go ahead and risk distress and suf-



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fering in a child to further their own ends.

"It is a wake-up call. The UN ban on reproductive cloning is stalled. Many will wonder how much longer it can be delayed."

Speaking at the HFEA's annual conference, this week, she added: "Any ban must be more than a declaration of condemnation. It must be backed up by national regimes capable of enforcing such a ban. With the exception of the UK, there are currently few countries anywhere in the world with the necessary regulatory regime to do that." □

Arne Sunde, professor and clinical embryologist at the University of Trondheim, Norway, and chairman of the European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology, agreed: "There is currently variation in different countries on regulations concerning reproductive cloning. All countries in Europe have a ban on reproductive cloning, but the United States—along with many countries in the Middle East and Far East—does not. The United Nations should agree an international ban." □