

The hoax is on us

Glenn Cardwell

Rumours often take on a life of their own, especially if they have a nasty streak. Some have attempted to achieve underground fame with their own brand of rumour: the nutrition hoax. The nutrition hoax should not be confused with the nutrition rip-off. The hoax is designed to create fear and confusion without direct financial gain. The rip-off merchant is in it only for the money. Permit me to describe some examples.

World's No1 carcinogen

Despite being approved as a food additive in many countries, citric acid has occasionally been accused of causing cancer. Why? The story all started back in 1974, according to Arnold Bender, Professor of Nutrition and Dietetics at the University of London. A letter, allegedly from a Paris hospital, listed 139 food additives, with citric acid being described as the most dangerous carcinogen of all.

The letter received media attention, and public concern spread so rapidly that the French Minister of Agriculture had to make a statement to the Senate in July 1976, to explain that citric acid was perfectly harmless and they were trying to find the perpetrator of the hoax. The story persisted and spread through Europe and Australia, making regular resurfacings over the last 20 years.

Citric acid (additive code 330) is a food additive occurring naturally in many fruits such as oranges, lemons, strawberries, pears, pineapple, tomatoes and bananas. Its tartness counterbalances the sweetness of sugar, and enhances the natural flavours in a variety of products, such as fruit-flavoured soft drinks.

Citric acid is widely used in such food products as soft drinks, toppings, confectionery, cordials, jams, marmalade, dessert products and pickles. It works synergistically with other antioxidants to stop food from going rancid and spoiling. The amount added to food is generally less than the amount consumed as fruit.

“Considering the amount of citric acid consumed from natural resources, it is unlikely that its use as an additive will have any significant effect on health” says Mark Wahlqvist, then Professor of Human Nutrition at Deakin University, in his book *Eating Matters*. Professor Bender agrees. “Of all the substances that can be described as ‘natural and harmless’, the one that most merits these titles is citric acid. It is not only present in most fruits, especially the citrus fruits from which it gets its name, but is also produced in every cell in the human body”.

A reminder here that citric acid is a metabolite in the body's process of converting glucose to energy. Indeed, Hans Krebs (1900-81) received a Nobel Prize in 1953 for describing the Citric Acid Cycle, now often referred to as the Krebs Cycle, underlying citric acid's essential role in life.

Chemical disaster

Dihydrogen monoxide (DHMO) is another chemical that has produced a recent scare. DHMO is described as a legal industrial solvent and coolant, fire retardant and a major component of acid rain.

There is no scientific doubt that accidental inhalation of DHMO causes many deaths each year. The argument for banning DHMO became quite emotional, when it was revealed that even young children had died when they had inhaled or had been burned by DHMO.

Dismissing the compelling evidence of deaths directly attributable to DHMO, both the US and Australian governments refused to ban or restrict it, allowing its continued use in food preparation and as a food additive. It is still used in animal experiments and waste management plants.

This was another hoax, but a hoax to remind us how easy it is to be a victim of hoaxes. In this case, everything claimed about DHMO was absolutely true. It was the deliberately fearful tone of the information that threw everyone off. DHMO is, as its name implies, a compound of two hydrogens and one oxygen, otherwise known as H₂O, or just plain water. It created enough fear for concerned US citizens to petition their congressmen demanding the banning of DHMO.

Three days of misery

My last example is the hoax diet, of which there have been two spectacular specimens. I was first asked to comment on the Heart Foundation's *Three Day Diet* program in a radio interview in October 1986, I then being an employee of the Heart Foundation. This photocopied, 900 calorie a day, plan had already done the rounds of the US and Britain as the *Miami Heart Hospital 3 Day Diet* and the *British Heart Foundation 3 Day Diet*, with both institutions pronouncing it a hoax through their media.

It claims to shed 10lb in three days, something usually only achieved by visiting the subcontinent. (Note: weight loss should always be expressed in pounds, while weight gain feels more comfortable when expressed in kilos). This diet sheet is still photocopied and distributed between friends, twelve years later. Every copy I have seen has been poorly typed or formatted with no letterhead nor contact details, yet people express great surprise to learn it hasn't been produced by the Heart Foundation.

“But it works” declared Mr J Public at a seminar. “So will a six pack of beer daily (900 cals), providing you don't eat any food” is my unimpressed reply.

It is still a difficult concept to most that weight loss comes from permanent healthy changes to food choices, rather than becoming the occasional devotee of some WWII prisoner-of-war menu.

Unlike the *Three Day Diet* which seems to be

Explanation



...Hoax from previous page

perpetually available, the *Cabbage Soup Diet* has cropped up in a photocopy frenzy only twice to my knowledge. Its last airing, in 1996, received media attention because Arnie Schwarzenegger was said to be on it ('Flatus the Barbarian'?). It was even published in the *West Australian* newspaper. My letter accusing the newspaper of nutritional irresponsibility and misogyny (it was in the 'women's section') drew no response from the section's female editor. This magical fat-burning soup had no link to the *Sacred Heart Memorial Hospital Diet* in the US, as was claimed. In fact, the hospital got a little peeved with the constant requests for the diet. "I don't know why it won't die. I guess because it sounds like a miracle" said their head dietitian, Elaine Reid.

It is comforting to know that there is enough silliness in nutrition to keep me both amused and employed.

