

Wednesday, October 10, 2007

The Democratic and Republican cloakrooms, where Members of Congress can congregate while the House is in session, are located just off the House Floor. Both have television screens, assorted couches and chairs and "snack bars." Nothing fancy. In fact, they remind me of the kind of concession stand you would see at a public beach, ice-skating rink, or pool. They sell hotdogs and sandwiches, snack foods and soda.

Last week, just before I was scheduled to preside over the House for two hours, I visited the snack bar. And set a bad example.

"Can I have a bag of those cheese-flavored orange crackers?" I asked.

[My staff later told me that the "orange" in the "crackers" didn't originate from cheese. And that while they tasted great, they didn't have much nutritional value. But in a profession where some of my colleagues are indicted, arrested or run out of office for serious crimes, I figured my weakness for orange "cheese-flavored" crackers (okay, and jelly beans, too) wouldn't imperil democracy.]

"Real nutritious, Israel" said one of my colleagues, whose elbows were planted on the counter, protecting a bowl of soup.

"It's not too bad!" I answered. "In fact, look at this!" I showed him the package. Under the nutritional information, a clear 'Zero Grams' was listed next to 'trans fat' content."

Mmmmmm. Tasty, and in environmentally-friendly packaging at the same time!

Wrong.

I later learned that food manufacturers are permitted to claim that their product has "0 Grams Trans fat" as long as it really contains less than .5 grams of trans fat. The problem: the American Heart Association recommends that individuals eat less than 2 grams of trans fat per day. So, if an individual eats multiple portions of a product claiming to contain 0 grams of trans fat but actually containing .49 grams, that individual may well exceed their daily allowance of trans fat without even knowing it!

This false labeling is not just a consumer protection issue. It's a health hazard. You can be dangerously exceeding recommended levels of trans fat during the day, even though the labels assure that you've had zero!

Only in Washington does $.49 + .49 + .49$ equal zero.



This tricky math may be calculated in Washington, but it affects people all over the country. I took this issue to Jericho Middle School. I sat with a 7th grade health class and asked them to take out their lunch bags. 18 typical brown paper bags were removed from back packs and placed on desks. Sandwiches, apples, "baked" chips and granola bars were put on display and I asked the students to look for "partially hydrogenated oils" on the ingredients list. Foods we typically think of as healthy- breakfast bars, baked products, even foods that tout "no trans fat!" can sometimes contain enough trans fat that when eaten throughout the course of the day, lead up to dangerous sums.

Now don't get me wrong. If people want to scarf down trans fat, that is their choice. But the federal government should not be an accomplice to the false advertising of a harmful substance that is making us less healthy and increasing the cost of health care. That is exactly what we are doing when we knowingly allow food manufacturers to label products as "0 Grams Trans fat" even when they contain almost half a gram.

I introduced legislation in Congress that would require greater transparency of trans fat content in nutritional labeling. The idea is to allow consumers to make educated and honest choices.

Over some fruit. And maybe a moderate handful of jellybeans.