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Seeing beyond

This is Perspective for Saturday, May 27, 2006

By Rudy Underwood and Lee Lemke

SPECIAL TO THE TELEGRAPH

[SNIP]

Hemp nutrition is not about hype

When you select poppy seed buns at the bakery, are you starting down the slippery slope of opium addiction? When you munch on an energy bar or a breakfast cereal that contains hemp seed, are you in danger of getting high on marijuana?

As a registered dietitian I can assure you that in both cases, the answer is a definite no. Even though the poppy seeds come from a poppy plant, it is the non-narcotic variety. Similarly, hemp seed that is used by the food industry comes from seeds incapable of germination and that have no drug effect.

This knowledge is critical in making good laws because unfortunately, some politicians are trying to ban hemp foods because, as more than one has stated recently, "Hemp foods send the wrong message about drugs to children." I can't imagine the same lawmakers believing that poppy seed buns promote heroin use? Obviously they do not. The reality is that hemp foods send a positive message about healthy eating.
To eat Hemp or not?

It is important to distinguish between edible hemp that is derived from seeds and used in foods such as waffles and cereal products, and marijuana, a psychoactive product consisting of flowers from a different variety of the cannabis plant.

In fact, edible hemp seeds and hemp seed oil not only are drug-free, they are highly nutritious food ingredients. They are, and always have been, legal in the United States.

Nutrition research in Europe and North America, including studies supported by the Canadian government, that shows hemp seed and its oil to be an important source of essential fats that are fundamental to our health. These food ingredients are unique in providing the two essential fatty acids (omega 6- and omega 3) in a 3:1 ratio that reflects the ideal balance that humans require. In addition, hemp seed oil is a one of our few sources of valuable gamma linolenic acid (GLA) and omega-3 pendant stearidonic acid SDA.

The omega 6- and omega 3- fatty acids that are present in hemp seeds and hemp seed oil cannot be made by the body and must be obtained through our diets. These fatty acids are required for the formation of healthy cell membranes. They help cells to keep their shape and flexibility and allow substances to flow in and out of cells. These essential fats are critical to the development and functioning of the brain and nervous system and are required for growth and development throughout the life cycle. They are needed for production of hormone-like substances called eicosanoids that regulate blood pressure, blood viscosity, vasoconstriction, and immune and inflammatory responses.

Current dietary patterns in the United States show that we have few good dietary sources of omega-3 fatty acids, and that many Americans fall short of recommended intakes.

Consuming a proper balance of omega 6- and omega 3- fatty acids helps us to avoid coronary artery disease, hypertension, type II diabetes and arthritis and other immune and inflammatory disorders. Hemp seed oil, with its unique fat composition, has been shown to improve clinical symptoms of atopic (allergic) dermatitis.

Edible hempseed does even more than give us the fats we require. It is high in protein (33 percent), dietary fiber, numerous minerals (such as magnesium, iron, and zinc), and vitamin E. Aware of these facts, consumers have increased their demand for highly nutritious foods that contain hempseed as an ingredient: Nutrition bars, waffles, breakfast cereals, bread and protein flours to name a few.

Recognizing the tremendous nutritional benefits and safety of this crop, and its distinction from marijuana, Canadian farmers have recently increased their hemp cultivation by 130 percent.

From a nutritionist's perspective hemp seed and hemp seed oil are entirely safe food ingredients and rich sources of beneficial nutrients. Banning hemp foods in light of Americas growing waistlines from unhealthy eating habits is simply misguided and would be a significant error. Hemp's omega-3 fatty acids that could reduce the risk of chronic disease and significantly improve the balance of essential fatty acids in the American diet is an underutilized food we would all do better having in our diets instead of under lock and key.

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