FOOD FADS AND MYTHS: A MINICOURSE

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As biologists, we are often the ones who are most likely to be expected to confront misinformation and fallacies associated with many natural physiological activities. Over the last few years we have witnessed the resurgence of ignorance in the fields of food, diets and nutrition. The need for separation of documented fact and sound principles from the gray areas of misinterpretation and fallacy as perpetuated by the promoters of pseudoscience has been clearly demonstrated in today's population. Educators and members of the scientific community are well aware of the need (see Barrett 1974 and Rynearson 1974).

The biology faculty at Kearney State College is aware of the student's need for accurate information and has developed a minicourse entitled, "Food Fads and Myths". The course was offered for the first time during the Spring Semester of 1975. The class met for a three hour session one evening a week for five weeks and offered one semester hour of undergraduate credit. The class members were evenly divided between full-time students and part-time continuing education students from the surrounding community.

Three goals for the course were established: First, providing accurate information derived from research findings in the fields of digestive anatomy and physiology, nutrition, and biochemistry. Second, developing a healthy skepticism in the students. Third, developing skills necessary for the critical analysis of popular myths and promotions.

To supplement the development of the skills, a discussion of advertising techniques was included. Each participant made an annotated collection of food and health advertisements clipped from magazines and newspapers. The advertising copy was cataloged as to category of sales technique (e.g., bandwagon, scare, nostalgic, etc.).

Incorporated into the minicourse was the requirement for a presentation of a review of a topic of the student's own choice. The topics available to one considering such a course are diverse. Among those our students covered were: megavitamin therapy, zen macrobiotic diets, the Stillman and Atkin's diets, "organic foods:, the Rodale Press, Carlton Fredericks, etc. The instructor maintained impartiality during the reviews. The students critically analyzed the subjects and drew their own conclusions.

Information pertinent to the subjects discussed was derived from FDA consumer publications, USDA information monographs, many reputable professional journals (e.g., Journal of the American Medical Association, Journal of Nutrition Education, American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, The Lancet, etc.), and appropriate texts. The assigned reading included three monographs by K.G. Neal (1974 a,b,c). The course was received enthusiastically by the students and the department tentatively plans to offer the course on a yearly or bi-yearly basis.

LITERATURE CITED