



For Immediate Release

August 17, 2007

Monograph Debunks Claims that Food and Other Targeted Products are “Addictive”

In a MONOGRAPH released today by the Washington Legal Foundation (WLF), social science and public policy analyst **Dr. John C. Luik** injects a compellingly researched and argued dose of reality into the debate over whether food and other products are “addictive.” As Dr. Luik argues, the term “addiction” reflects a specific pharmacological condition with specific symptoms. However, over the past several decades, activist-minded academics, government regulators, and private attorneys have manipulated the term to support their policy and litigation goals, to the detriment of sound science and public health.

SCIENCE THROUGH THE LOOKING-GLASS: THE MANIPULATION OF “ADDICTION” & ITS INFLUENCE OVER OBESITY POLICY was authored *pro bono* by Dr. Luik, who has written extensively on the use of social science to achieve policy objectives and is a Senior Fellow at the Democracy Institute. The MONOGRAPH features a foreword by WLF Chairman and General Counsel Daniel J. Popeo.

Claims of addiction have become an essential part of activists’, regulators’, and lawyers’ *modus operandi* in creating the proper environment for regulation of and litigation against producers of “disfavored” products. Addiction evokes troubling images of individuals whose will and choices have been overborne. For this reason, Dr. Luik writes, domestic and international public health groups beginning in the 1960s gradually changed the criteria for “addiction” and applied the label to behaviors and substances which under traditional pharmacological terms was at most habit-forming. The removal of such key criteria as physical dependence, increasing tolerance to a substance, and withdrawal, Dr. Luik argues, was not related to changes in science, but traces back to health policy-making. The broadening of “addiction” also offers a convenient antidote to arguments in litigation that a plaintiff assumed the risks attendant with certain products, because to be addicted means to lose one’s ability to choose.

Throughout the MONOGRAPH’s initial section, Dr. Luik presents a highly documented case supporting his thesis that the concept of addiction has become tainted by ideology and the quest for regulation through litigation. He next devotes a section to how this new concept of addiction impacted tobacco control policy. As he states, “We wish to examine the way in which the idea of addiction was used in the debate over smoking not simply because it richly illustrates the triumph of policy over science. We use this example because so much of the use of the concept of addiction with respect to food and obesity is based on the claim that food addiction is in some way analogous to tobacco addiction.” He notes how the original U.S. Surgeon General’s report did not categorize tobacco use as an addiction, and argues that the science underlying use of the product has not changed since then, but certainly the impetus to control it and litigate against the product’s producers, had intensified.

Dr. Luik then turns his attention to the misuse of the term addiction in the burgeoning area of obesity policy. Dr. Luik notes that it is special interest activists, lawyers, and ideologically-motivated researchers, not reputable scientists, who are advancing these claims. This is because “there is little scientific evidence supporting the claim that food is addictive generally. There is also no scientific evidence supporting an analogy between

nicotine and food based on the Surgeon General’s criteria of nicotine addiction.” He meticulously dismantles the activists’ arguments. Most prominently, he argues that researchers can point to no serious withdrawal symptoms from any food, and fail to identify specific substances within food to which the human body becomes tolerant, and thus craves for more. Instead, what we hear from activists is that broad categories of food, such as “fast food” or “sugary drinks” are addictive.

The MONOGRAPH’s conclusion warns that if activists and lawyers successfully manipulate addiction, few products or behaviors will be free from such a label. Dr. Luik writes that instead of “collapsing under the weight of its own incoherence,” the new concept of addiction will likely persist, because if the current criteria don’t allow for something to be labeled “addictive,” then policymakers can once again shape and mold its meaning to meet their own needs. He notes recent attempts to label video game use as addictive. Even though psychologists decided not to formally apply the addiction concept, Dr. Luik argues, the idea of addictive gaming is now in the public’s mind, making it easier to advance regulation and eventual lawsuits.

Manipulating addiction, Dr. Luik concludes, ultimately disserves the public health. If people become convinced that a particular product or behavior is “addictive,” they will be resigned to a fate of uncontrollable use, and will cast aside moderation or ceasing of unhealthy practices. Science itself will suffer a similar fate, he argues: “Science has allowed itself to be co-opted by the ends of the policy process and in doing so become a partisan in the policy process rather than a guarantor of its objectivity. The policy process, by creating science for its own ends has destroyed one of the important hallmarks of its legitimacy.”

Copies of this educational WLF Monograph can be obtained by contacting the Publications Department, Washington Legal Foundation, 2009 Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Washington, D.C. 20036, or calling (202) 588-0302. Questions regarding the Monograph or WLF’s publications can be directed to Legal Studies Division Chief Counsel Glenn Lammi.

Washington Legal Foundation is a national, non-profit public interest law and policy center. By utilizing a unique approach to forwarding its mission — publishing timely legal studies, engaging in innovative litigation, and communicating directly to the public — WLF has become the nation’s most effective advocate of freedom and free enterprise. This Monograph is one of seven free-standing formats in which WLF’s Legal Studies Division produces legal policy papers and promotes free enterprise legal thought.