

“Fed Up”: A movie review



Last weekend, I went to see *Fed Up*, co-produced by Katie Couric and Laurie David. I got to the megaplex and found it mobbed with crowds for the opening weekend of *Godzilla*, which was sold out. Tickets for *Fed Up* were all too-readily available.

I made my way up to theater 10 (there were 25!). I ran the gauntlet of mountains of candy and snack foods to get there—there are fast-food hubs, including an Applebee's, on every level of this multistory urban multiplex.

No giant IMAX theater for this screening of *Fed Up*. There were maybe two dozen hard-core devotees scattered through the auditorium. A woman carrying a large soda and huge tub of popcorn moved uncertainly into my row then decided to sit somewhere else. By the end of the movie, she may have regretted her snack choices



I went with some reservations: I was concerned that the movie might be yet another in a succession of vegan polemics against saturated fat and cholesterol and meat in the U.S. diet, and I was wary of Ms. David's agitprop skills, having found *Inconvenient Truth* to be over-the-top and simplistic, albeit effective.

Oh, and seeing a movie about nutrition on a Saturday night is a bit of a busman's holiday for me.

But I was pleasantly surprised.

First of all, I was happy with the cast of experts that Couric and David assembled. And this was a deliberate, conscious choice, reflecting a rejection of the low-fat, vegetarian partyline endorsed by such previous documentaries as *Forks Over Knives*.

Instead of the usual vegan acolytes like Dean Ornish, John McDougall, John Robbins, Caldwell Esselstyn and T. Colin Campbell, *Fed Up* taps many of the people whom I've interviewed on *Intelligent Medicine* (and its predecessor, *Health Talk*). They include Gary Taubes, Marion Nestle, Michele Simon and Kelly Brownell as well as Mark Bittman, Dr. Mark Hyman, former FDA Commissioner Dr. David Kessler and Dr. Robert Lustig.

Taubes', Hyman's and Lustig's appearances in this movie guarantee that its interpretation of where we've gone off the rails with the American diet lies in the direction of excess sugar and refined carbohydrates, not excess fat or meat.

The theme was that Americans have been bamboozled into thinking that a simple thermodynamic equation underlies their staggering propensity to obesity: calories consumed > calories burned in exercise.

Instead, the movie's experts explain, we have overwhelmed our carbohydrate-handling capabilities, resulting in insulin-resistance.

Nor did *Fed Up* miss the nuance that low-cal and artificially sweetened beverages and foods are no panacea; Dr. Mark Hyman explains how they can trick the body into craving more real sweets, thus leading to weight gain comparable to regular food, which at least offers true satiety.

The key message: *It's the food, stupid!*

I have to say, I felt a surge of pride and vindication that I've been in the vanguard of this type of messaging over the years!

The food and beverage industries perpetuate the myth that "moderate" consumption of sugar and soft drinks is part of an overall "healthy lifestyle." The calories that carbs deliver, they maintain, are qualitatively no different from those delivered by other foods, and that exercise can offset their waistline-expanding effects. Not!

The movie gives props to Michelle Obama for her "Let's Move" campaign but definitely leaves you with the impression that she's been successfully "played" by Big Food to scale down her recommendations about diet; she seems to have been relegated to the role of a cheerleader for exercise, which is innocuous and doesn't entail taking on powerful lobbies.

Some fun facts: While new food labels display the percentage of the recommended daily value of major key nutrients, sugar's percentage is conspicuously absent (at the behest of food and beverage trade groups). And new, "healthier" Oreos are lower in calories—140 versus 150—but still contain the same amount of sugar. Token reform like this won't work—*Fed Up* tells us we need a revolution in our attitudes toward food.

While I'm no fan of government regulation, I was shamed by images of Sarah Palin flaunting a Big-Gulp soda, and Fox News commentators decrying attempts to reign in corporate America's assault on our health as "Nanny Statism."

Fed Up tries to create a climate of moral indignation to get us to stop eating junk. I favor education and personal responsibility, but the movie argues successfully that seductive commercial pressures are so pervasive that regulation may be the only solution.

Maybe sugary foods and soft drinks should carry warning labels like cigarettes? Other countries such as Mexico are already experimenting with measures like this to stem the tide of obesity.

I say eliminate food subsidies altogether. As the movie points out, they simply underwrite consumption of cheap high-octane foods such as flour products and high-fructose corn syrup.

After seeing *Fed Up*, I think you'll agree that, regardless of our political orientations, we must reach consensus that the toxic foods that surround us represent at least as much of a hazard to us and to future generations as environmental pollution, which we've made strides toward controlling.

Sitting there in the half-empty theater, I felt happy to have been—for many decades now—an original foot soldier in the war against bad diet.

For more on *Fed Up*, see the movie's official website.