Michael F. Jacobson, Ph.D.
Executive Director
Center for Science in the Public Interest
Press Conference on Quorn Foods and Mycoprotein
August 12, 2002

This morning, we are focusing attention on a new line of foods that are causing terrible side effects in some consumers. The products are made by a giant drug company that hasn’t told the truth to consumers. And the Food and Drug Administration, the government’s preeminent food-safety agency, is, in effect, telling consumers, “we don’t care if you get sick.” Today we are asking the FDA to have the company recall its products from the marketplace.

The products are Quorn-brand meat substitutes. The maker of Quorn, AstraZeneca’s Marlow Foods division, has told journalists and the public that its product is safe, causing illnesses in only one out of about 140,000 people. That figure is a complete joke. It assumes that everyone who suffered a problem identified its cause and contacted the company.

CSPI, with relatively little effort, has heard from more than 30 victims of Quorn. About half of those are Americans, most of the rest Britons. Two-thirds of them reported vomiting, sometimes with diarrhea. Two people passed out. Others suffered stomach pains or nausea. One man had severe hives on his back and had difficulty breathing. He went to the hospital and was treated. At least two others sought medical attention.

To give you a better sense of Quorn’s side effects, I’d like to introduce a few people who can tell you what they experienced after eating a Quorn product.

The 30 people who’ve contacted us through our little-publicized web site – www.QuornComplaints.com – are undoubtedly the tip of the iceberg. Frankly, I’m surprised we heard from anyone considering how obscure our web site is and that Quorn products have been sold in only a tiny percentage of U.S. grocery stores for only a few months. The company hopes to increase sales tremendously in the coming years. If that happens, the number of Americans who suffer Quorn misery will increase tremendously.

The exact cause or causes of gastrointestinal symptoms is not known. The family of molds that includes the one used to make Quorn produces powerful toxins. One of the toxins is even called “vomitoxin,” though that particular one is not produced by the mold used in Quorn foods. The company says it grows the fungus in conditions that preclude any toxins from forming. It is possibly that the symptoms reflect allergic reactions. Some people don’t get sick until they have eaten Quorn several times. That suggests a sensitization process.

Though the underlying cause may not be clear, the kinds of problems that Quorn causes are quite clear. Ten years ago, British scientists published a report on ten consumers who vomited and had diarrhea after eating Quorn. Also, the manufacturer provided the FDA with a study that found that ten percent of 200 people who ate Quorn’s fungal ingredient up to eight times over a four-
week period either vomited, had a stomach ache, or felt nauseous. Half that percentage of
subjects who did not eat the fungal ingredient had one of those symptoms.

Currently, there is great concern about existing foods to which consumers are allergic or
otherwise sensitive. Yet, the FDA seems perfectly content to allow yet another one into the food
supply. One FDA official told me that as long as there is no proof that an ingredient is deadly,
the agency’s policy, as reflected in its approval of olestra, is to let people get sick and then let
them figure out what the cause is. Then they could avoid the ingredient in the future by carefully
reading food labels. To knowingly let people get sick is a perfectly sick policy. It wasn’t
appropriate for olestra, and it isn’t appropriate for Quorn. Also, the FDA pretends that
pinpointing the cause of a problem is a simple matter. It isn’t. Numerous people got sick several
times before they figured out the cause. Also, because some people ate Quorn several times
without getting sick, they figured that that couldn’t be the problem. While they weren’t getting
sick, they may have been getting sensitized.

Under the law, companies have to show that new food additives pose a “reasonable certainty of
no harm.” Whether vomiting and fainting cause “harm” is obviously a judgment call. In 1995,
FDA Commissioner David Kessler said that in his opinion “if someone is going to the bathroom
all day, and there is really an effect on someone’s life, that, certainly can be – I think one could
argue that that is harm.”

The maker of Quorn foods acknowledges that its products make at least a few people sick. But it
says that Quorn has been marketed nationally in the United Kingdom since 1993 without protest.
It says that most consumers don’t get sick and that other foods, like soy, also cause problems.
Frankly, I don’t think that’s much of a defense. So what if existing ingredients cause problems?
We shouldn’t be adding new dangers to our food supply. As for safety in Britain, no one has
really investigated the situation carefully. In the case of deceptive advertising, it took a
complaint from CSPI to British authorities to force Marlow Foods to suspend its ads claiming
that Quorn is made with mushroom protein. (Taxonomically, the Quorn mold is about as closely
related to mushrooms as human beings are to goldfish.)

Today, we are asking the FDA to end AstraZeneca’s experiment on Americans. Quorn products
have been on the market for only a few months, but they clearly fail the test of safety. America
doesn’t need another olestra sullying our food supply. We are asking the FDA to revoke Quorn’s
status as Generally Recognized As Safe — it clearly isn’t safe — and to deny AstraZeneca’s
food additive petition. We are also asking the FDA to have the company to recall its products
from the marketplace.

# # #