April 24, 2012

Dr. Margaret Hamburg, Commissioner
U.S. Food and Drug Administration
10903 New Hampshire Ave.
Silver Spring, MD 20993

Dear Commissioner Hamburg:

Two years ago, in April 2010, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) issued a landmark report on strategies to reduce sodium that recommended that the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) set mandatory limits, phased in gradually over time, on the sodium content of packaged and restaurant foods. That recommendation came after the IOM concluded that a voluntary industry approach to sodium reduction had failed over the previous 40 years. We urge the FDA to act now and implement strong regulations that would substantially cut sodium levels—and save tens of thousands of lives annually—in processed and restaurant foods.

A new study in the Canadian Medical Association Journal, which I coauthored, found that the sodium content of the same fast food items varied, sometimes dramatically, from one country to another. Those comparisons indicate that "technical reasons," often cited by companies as a barrier to sodium reduction, is not always a valid excuse.

High levels of sodium consumption contribute to hypertension, which 90 percent of Americans will develop over their lifetimes, and can increase the risk of heart disease, stroke, and kidney disease. Upwards of 100,000 lives could be saved annually if sodium levels in packaged and restaurant foods were cut in half. Direct medical costs would drop by an estimated $18 billion per year by reducing sodium consumption from 3,400 mg to 2,300 mg per day and by $28 billion per year if sodium consumption was reduced to 1,500 mg per day.

There is virtually nothing else the FDA could do to improve America’s food supply that would provide a greater health benefit than reducing sodium levels in the foods we eat. We urge the FDA to issue strong rules that will protect Americans’ health. Such rules are long overdue.

Sincerely,

Michael F. Jacobson, Ph.D.
Executive Director