MEMO FROM MFJ

Happy Birthday to Us!

I n 1970, James Sullivan, an oceanographer, Albert Fritsch, a chemist, and I, a microbiologist, met in Washington as interns or volunteers with Ralph Nader’s Center for Study of Responsive Law.

After working with each other for several months, we thought it would be useful to create an organization run by scientists and devoted to public interest advocacy and to encouraging other scientists to use their skills for the public good.

If we had considered the matter carefully, we might have realized that we had no experience running an organization, no money, no connections, and almost no chance of success. But we didn’t, and so, in 1971, was born the Center for Science in the Public Interest.

At first, we worked on a wide range of issues, from asbestos to air pollution to food additives. But after Jim and Al left in 1977 (Jim is still on the board of directors), we focused mostly on nutrition and food safety.

From that auspicious beginning, CSPI has grown into an organization that is greatly respected (even by government officials and politicians we sometimes criticize and by company executives whose employers we sometimes sue), widely quoted in the media, and impressively effective. We’ve built a dynamic Web site that has become a go-to source for on-line information. And we publish a steady flow of reports, books, and articles. (For more on our history and current work, see the “About CSPI” video at youtube.com/CSPI TV.)

CSPI has been fortunate to have had an extraordinarily talented and devoted staff. We began publishing Nutrition Action Healthletter in 1974, and its current writers and editors—Jayne Hurley, Bonnie Liebman, David Schardt, and Stephen Schmidt—have been together for more than 20 years (Bonnie has been at CSPI for more than 30).

Then there’s George Hacker, Greg Jaffe, Caroline Smith DeWaal, Margo Wootan, and relative newcomers like litigation director Steve Gardner. Their ability to work with hard-core activists, lawmakers, government officials, and industry has been one of the keys to their—and CSPI’s—effectiveness.

And there’s deputy director Dennis Bass, who, for 30 years, has worked behind the scenes to help make Nutrition Action the world’s largest-circulation health newsletter.

CSPI has changed the food landscape. Without us, there might be no Nutrition Facts labels on food packages. Because of our efforts, there is an official definition of “organic,” labels have to disclose the presence of allergens, and partially hydrogenated oil, salt, olestra, sulfites, nitrite, and Violet No. 1 dye have been reduced in, or eliminated from, the food supply.

And without CSPI, legislators might not have passed last year’s historic food-safety law, as well as laws to require calorie labeling on menus and to get junk foods out of schools (2010 was our biggest legislative year ever).

One of our most exciting projects was Food Day in the mid-1970s. In this anniversary year, CSPI is reviving Food Day (on October 24th). Our goal: to expand the grassroots movement for healthy, affordable food produced in a humane, sustainable way. (If you’re interested in spearheading efforts in your community, let me know at foodday@cspinet.org.)

Nutrition Action also has been fortunate to have had hundreds of thousands of loyal subscribers, some of whom fuel our advocacy efforts with (mostly small) donations. Without you, CSPI long ago would have shriveled and died.

I hope that our next 40 years will be as exciting and productive as our first 40.

Mike Jacobson
Executive Director
Center for Science in the Public Interest

The contents of NAIs are not intended to provide medical advice, which should be obtained from a qualified health professional.

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The Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) is the nonprofit health-advocacy group that publishes Nutrition Action Healthletter. CSPI mounts educational programs and presses for changes in government and corporate policies.

Design and production by The Page Group (www.pagegroup.com).

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STAFF

EDITORIAL
Michael F. Jacobson, Ph.D.
Executive Editor
Bonnie Liebman, M.S.
Director of Nutrition
Stephen B. Schmidt
Editor-in-Chief
Jayne Hurley, RD
David Schardt
Senior Nutritionists
Kate Sherwood
Culinary Director
Melissa Pryputniewicz, B.S.
Barbara Hasselblatt, M.S.
Project Coordinators

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Myriam Boucher
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National Cancer Institute

Nutrition Action Healthletter (ISSN 0885-7792) is published 10 times a year (monthly except bi-monthly in Jan./Feb. and Jul./Aug.).

POSTMASTER: Send changes to Nutrition Action Healthletter, 1220 L Street, NW, Suite 300, Washington, DC 20005.

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“Psst! Wanna buy some healthy greens?”
Me, 1972.

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