

NEW WORLD

Obesity, Public Health and Public Policy

by our Washington Correspondent

AS examples of sheer quackery, non-prescription drugs and other devices designed to help people lose weight are hard to beat. Consider, for example, the product which is supposed to depress appetite, but which consists solely of corn syrup, vegetable oils, sweetened condensed whole milk and vitamins. According to Dr Jean Meyer, professor of nutrition at Harvard University, so-called slimming aids sold over the counter "are a gigantic fraud perpetuated on the American consumer . . . I have never seen any demonstration that any of them has any value whatsoever".

Dr Meyer's statement came during hearings on anti-obesity drugs conducted last week by the Senate Monopolies Subcommittee, and it was reiterated by every other witness before the committee. So much for the efficacy of non-prescription drugs which together account for a \$17 million a year market.

These products constitute a problem which is fairly easy to resolve, however, since they will come under an extensive review of the efficacy of all over-the-counter drugs which is now being conducted by the Food and Drug Administration, and action can be taken against those which fail to live up to the extravagant claims made for them. But what of the drugs which can only be obtained on prescription? They are an entirely different problem, and their regulation brings up important questions of public health and regulatory policy.

First, it must be borne in mind that the control of obesity is big business in the United States—there are about 30 million Americans between the ages of 21 and 65 who are believed to be at least 20 per cent overweight, and last year 26 million prescriptions were filled or refilled for weight-reducing drugs. One FDA official estimated last week that sales of such drugs amounted to about \$65 million last year alone. Second, obesity is an extremely complex complaint, whose causes range from the psychological and physiological to lack of exercise or simply overeating. But, as Dr Meyer pointed out, the average American is provided with the ideal atmosphere in which to become obese—labour-saving devices and personal transportation have reduced exercise, and there is almost unlimited access to food of all kinds.

Apart from its contribution to the

profits of drug companies, however, obesity is also a serious public health problem. It was suggested during the committee hearings last week, for example, that although expenditure on medical services has increased from about \$12,000 million in 1915 to about \$75,000 million this year, there has been no improvement in the life expectancy of the average American at the age of 20. The chief reason for this is the increased incidence of cardiovascular disease, in which dietary habits and obesity are important factors.

Because of the extent of obesity in the United States, and its relationship to public health, the Food and Drug Administration earlier this year initiated a thorough review of the efficacy of the prescription drugs that are now being used to treat obesity. The drugs, which are all designed to suppress appetite, are mostly amphetamines or related compounds, and there are about seventy different brands on the market. But a cost-benefit analysis of anti-obesity drugs is, however, complicated by the fact that since they nearly all stimulate the central nervous system, they have been widely abused and have a potential for drug dependency. This, of course, add to the risks which must be incorporated in the cost-benefit equation.

The central part of the FDA review was a series of 200 double-blind trials carried out on almost 10,000 patients, who were given either appetite-suppressant drugs or placebos. The results of these trials were reviewed by an independent panel of doctors led by Dr Thaddeus E. Prout, professor of medicine at Johns Hopkins University, and they were outlined at the committee hearings last week by Dr Henry E. Simmons, director of the Bureau of Drugs at the FDA.

In short, the review panel found that patients treated with appetite-suppressant drugs did lose more weight than those treated with placebos, but that the extra weight loss was "trivial"—no more than a fraction of a pound a week on average. It was found, however, that the extent of weight loss differed from trial to trial, and the increased weight loss in some trials "seems to be related to variables other than the drug prescribed", the panel noted. The panel also said that there was no evidence in the data from the trials to show that the combination of an appetite-suppressant with other drugs increases the benefits or reduces the risks.

On the strength of these results, Dr Simmons told the committee that the FDA is about to regulate the use of anti-obesity drugs more tightly. The first step will be a warning to doctors, published this week in the FDA Drug Bulletin which goes to every doctor in the country, that appetite-suppressant drugs have limited effect, and that they should only be used when other methods have failed. The FDA has also proposed labelling on the package to that effect. Finally, and perhaps most

BUDGETS

A Suit to Watch

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A LAW suit which has important implications in several areas, including some in which science and technology are involved, was filed last week in the Federal Court for the District of Columbia. Lawyers acting for the City of New York have charged that the Administration acted illegally in withholding \$6,000 million of the \$11,000 million that Congress had voted to give the states for construction of water pollution control facilities. The issue is whether the White House can legally withhold funds which have been appropriated by Congress—the Administration is expected to withhold funds earmarked for several other projects this fiscal year (see *Nature*, 240, 374; 1972).

The White House has, in the past, based its authority to withhold funds on a law passed in 1870 which requires the Office of Management and Budget to sanction the expenditure of money by federal agencies, even though the money has already been appropriated by Congress. The courts have, however, not yet ruled on the constitutionality of withholding such funds, although a similar case has been filed by the state of Missouri claiming that the Administration has acted illegally in withholding highway funds. The New York lawyers said last week that they are prepared to go to the Supreme Court if necessary and that in any case the Supreme Court is the appropriate place to determine constitutional relationships between the White House and Congress.