

Media Report**Fast Food Nation**

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Most people are familiar today with some form of fast food, and fast food restaurants can be found in many cities around the world. In *Fast Food Nation* (Penguin Books, 2002) investigative journalist Eric Schlosser investigates the origins and development of the "all-American meal" and its international impact. Schlosser was also a writer and executive producer for the 2006 film based on his book, which dramatizes - and humanizes - many of the points made in the book. While the book and the film cover all aspects of the fast food industry, there are many points made that ought to be considered by health care professionals and those in the medical sciences.

Schlosser's examination of the meat packing industry links its processing techniques with "mad cow disease." To fatten farm animals before slaughtering, they are fed growth hormones and to provide protein for faster growth they are fed a mixture of grain and ground up animal parts. The diseased proteins that cause "mad cow disease" can be transmitted throughout a factory farm by this industrial feeding tactic. Studies have suggested that the human ingestion of this diseased beef has been implicated in degenerative brain disorders, such as Creutzfeld-Jacob Disease.

The fast-paced gutting of an animal causes its innards to be splattered about, and a certain amount of feces always ends up in the meat.

Schlosser found outbreaks of bacterial diseases among fast food consumers who have eaten meat contain fecal matter. Some US food laws allow a certain amount of feces in meat, but the real amount, because of the fast slaughtering process, is often much higher, so the industry has begun promoting food-irradiation to kill off bacteria. While increasing awareness of such issues in America and Europe has forced the industry to raise its standards at home, it continues to ship infected meat-products to the rest of the world, where there are fewer regulations. In some cases, local governments have banned American beef.

Because of the intense processing of fast food, there is little actual flavor left in it for the human palate to enjoy. By the time consumers get their burgers and fries, they have been denatured of practically all their nutrients and taste by the industrial methods of production and distribution. The lack of nutrients can perhaps be overlooked by consumers, but a lack of taste is unbearable. The industrial solution is to manufacture taste, so all fast foods are infused with a witch's brew of chemically induced aromas and flavors. Although the flavor-design industry is very secretive, Schlosser was allowed some access to plants in New Jersey, after he signed an agreement that he would not reveal the names of clients that purchase flavors manufactured at the places he visited.

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Schlosser found two main categories of designer flavors and aromas: "artificial" and "natural." While artificial flavors are synthesized entirely from chemicals, natural flavors are extracted and distilled with chemicals from natural substances. However, the flavor or aroma of these "natural" substances is not necessarily what its name suggests. For example, the flavor-design industry creates "natural almond flavor" by using volatile chemicals to extract flavor oils from peach pits, because they have a similar taste but are cheaper than almonds. Although "natural" is supposed to be healthier than "artificial," Schlosser found that in some cases the chemical processes used to extract "natural flavors" can actually create a flavor or aroma compound that is quite toxic.

While this story is clearly about American social and health problems, it also has global implications. Beyond being a local manifestation of corporate consumer culture in the USA, the fast food industry is also providing a global model for the production, distribution and consumption of food. To the extent that

this model is adopted internationally, it becomes important to monitor its impact in places where it has already become a defining feature of the society. Ironically, the developing world might be somewhat protected from these problems, due to the general lack of industrial development. However, with trade agreements gradually eroding national boundaries and spreading the Western industrial model far and wide, those problems that seem to be only localized in the industrial world may indeed become global problems. Schlosser hopes that this story will contribute to global awareness of the dangers of fast food, and that future historians "will consider the American fast food industry a relic of the twentieth century - a set of attitudes, systems, and beliefs that emerged from postwar southern California, that embodied its limitless faith in technology, that quickly spread across the globe, flourished briefly, and then receded, once its true costs became clear and its thinking became obsolete."