

Across the Editor's Desk

Donald Drake, science writer, had an article headlined "Disturbing Question Raised by Study of Polyunsaturated Diet" in the April 18 issue of the Philadelphia Inquirer. While the article may not be completely satisfactory to farmers who feel that polyunsaturated diets have been discredited by recent research, the article does at least raise some serious questions for those urban residents who have been moving toward a polyunsaturated diet. The complete text of the article is as follows:

Millions of Americans for years now have been dutifully eating diets high in polyunsaturated fats with the hope that this simple precaution would protect them from heart attacks.

Instead of meat, they eat fish. Instead of butter, they use margarine. Instead of traditional oils they eat corn oil in their salads.

One experiment after another showed that strict adherence to such diets would lower blood fats like the triglycerides and cholesterol and one epidemiologic study after another indicated that a cut in these blood fats seemed to reduce the chances of developing heart trouble.

The scientists were so encouraged by these findings that a massive, multimillion dollar study was proposed to test these diets on hundreds of thousands of Americans.

For a variety of reasons the proposal was shelved by the Federal Government. One reason was that some scientists felt not enough was known to precisely tinker with the diet so that just the potentially harmful things in it were eliminated.

Now scientists have come up with some studies, indicating that it is premature to put the

entire nation on diets high in polyunsaturated fats.

One of the more disturbing of these studies was presented in a recent issue of the medical journal Lancet by Dr. Morton Lee Pearce of the University of California School of Medicine in Los Angeles and Dr. Seymour Dayton of the Los Angeles Veterans Administration Center.

Cancer Factor

Studying 846 men at the VA's Wadsworth Hospital, the researchers did indeed find that those men on the polyunsaturated were about 40 percent less likely to develop heart trouble.

But they also found that the men on the special diet were almost twice as likely to develop cancer.

This raised an obviously disturbing question.

Do diets high in polyunsaturated fats promote cancer? Does it mean that precautions taken against heart trouble, merely leave a person more prone to cancer? Could nature be so incredibly tricky and mean?

Mindful of all the scientific

work that has indicated the value of such diets, Drs. Pearce and Dayton were extremely cautious in their interpretation of the data.

In fact, they went so far as to state:

"The high incidence of fatal carcinomas in our experimental group is of borderline significance."

They went on to explain, as the authors of opposing studies usually fail to do, that a review of the data may show that the diet had nothing to do with cancer, that it was a chance occurrence or some other unknown factor was at work.

But in light of the preliminary work, they did think it worth saying:

Tests Urged

"We think it premature to make a blanket prescription of a diet high in polyunsaturated fat for the entire population."

It was their belief that the data was sufficiently disturbing to require more tests along these lines.

But they also felt that since it is clear that a person with a lot of these fats in the blood runs a greater risk of developing heart trouble, that such people should cut saturated fats such as those found in meat, eggs, cheese and other dietary products.

The California study consisted of feeding 422 patients in the VA hospital conventional American diets and 42 men diets with a lot of polyunsaturated fats.

After more than eight years, they found that 70 of the men eating the conventional diet developed fatal heart and blood-vessel diseases as compared to 48 on the polyunsaturated diet.

The over-all fatality rate was similar, however: 174 deaths in the polyunsaturated group as compared to 178 among those on the conventional diet.

A check of the death records showed that the big difference was in the area of cancer. The polyunsaturated group had 31 cancer deaths as compared to 17 in the other group.

Even if the diets were responsible for the difference, doctors don't know if the polyunsaturated fats were responsible, or the comparative lack of meat or saturated fats or simply because the persons saved from heart attacks lived long enough to develop cancer.

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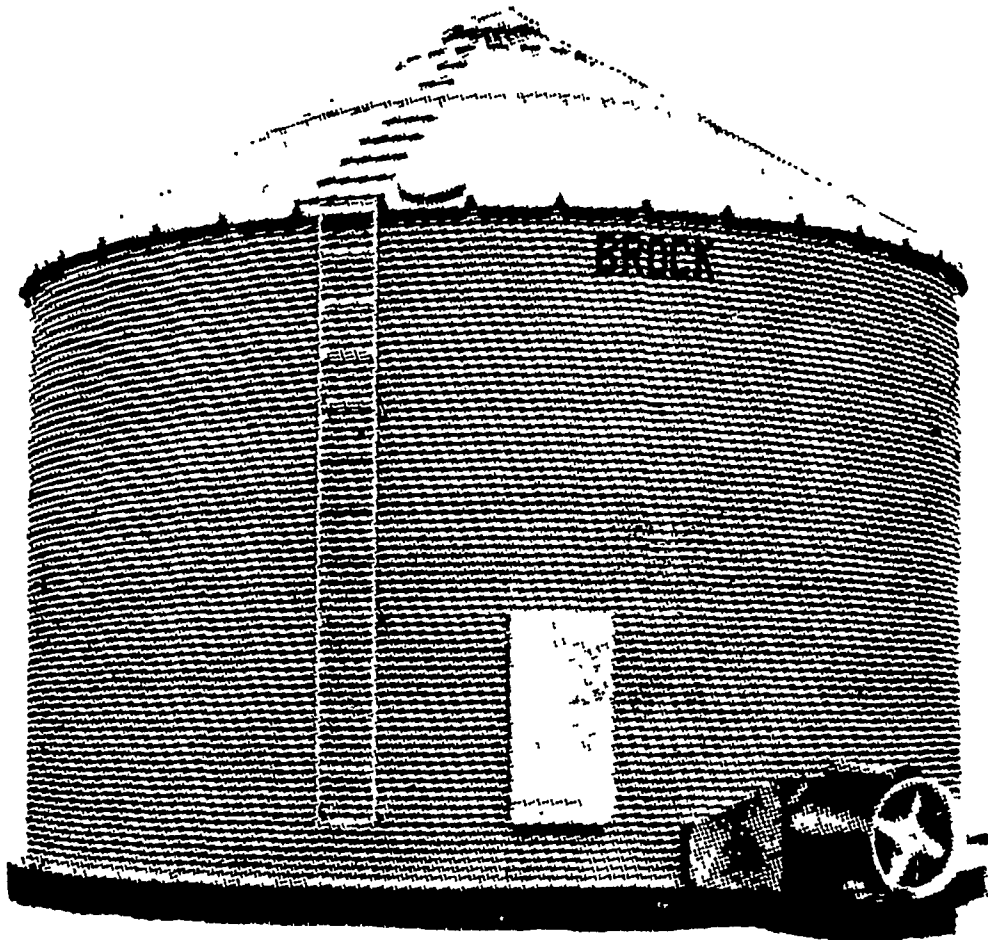
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