



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES

(74)

Food and Drug Administration
Rockville MD 20857

DEC 21 2000

The Honorable Dianne Feinstein
Unites States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510-0504

Dear Senator Feinstein:

Thank you for your letter of September 27, 2000, on behalf of your constituent, Jane M. Hightower, M.D., of San Francisco, California, concerning methylmercury in seafood. We apologize for the delay in getting a response to you on this matter.

Dr. Hightower states that she is treating patients with methylmercury poisoning as a result of eating fish. She expresses concerns that the consumer advisory issued by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA or the Agency) on methylmercury in seafood is not well known and, in any event, appears to be inconsistent with the Agency's own action level for methylmercury of one part per million because it allows for some consumption of species that are known to sometimes exceed the action level.

Virtually all fish contain at least trace amounts of methylmercury. The most frequently consumed commercial species contain relatively low levels of methylmercury. The commercial species that contain the highest average amounts of methylmercury -- shark and swordfish -- are expensive and are consumed relatively infrequently even by people who may be regarded as consumers of these species. For example, the known average consumption for swordfish among consumers of swordfish is once every several months. A single serving does not measurably raise the consumer's body burden for methylmercury.

Consequently, if there are consumers who are experiencing methylmercury toxicity from consuming commercial seafood, they must not only be consuming in amounts that considerably exceed the national consumption averages, they must be doing so on a very steady basis. FDA's existing consumption advisory was developed to help people avoid that kind of consumption. It was also designed to help consumers avoid adding anything to their

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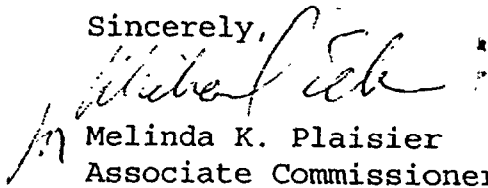
measurable body burden of methylmercury, even though the species subject to the advisory sometimes exceed FDA's action level.

We agree with Dr. Hightower that FDA's consumption advisory has not become widely known. FDA is in the process of reviewing its advisory, both for content and for how it could be distributed and publicized so as to increase consumer awareness of it.

As we proceed with the review of our seafood advisory, we are very interested in reviewing all credible scientific data on the adverse health effects of methylmercury in seafood. If Dr. Hightower has specific information (e.g., hair or blood methylmercury levels, adverse symptoms) on individuals who have consumed fish, FDA would be very interested in having an opportunity to review this information.

Thanks again for contacting us concerning this issue. We appreciate your interest in the matter. If you have further questions, please let us know.

Sincerely,


Melinda K. Plaisier
Associate Commissioner
for Legislation