



Zeal does not make it true

Last week we wrote about some of the most ridiculous nutrition hype we have heard. Although it was fun to vent our frustration, one column is but a small drop quickly lost in an ocean of bogus information.

When it comes to nutrition and health, it is a constant battle to sort out sensible information from nonsense. In sales and marketing, it is human nature to tell people what they want to hear. It is also human nature to believe a sales pitch if it is what a person wants to be true. In the nutrition market, sales are made more often on hope than on reality.

Often the people marketing misinformation are themselves victims who learned the hype from so-called experts. They unknowingly become dangerous in their zealousness because they really believe what they are repeating.

Equally hazardous are special interest groups that use

bits and pieces of information, stretching the truth to support their cause. If something is repeated enough, even those who made it up start to believe it.

We refer to these groups as Mutual Illusion Support Systems or MISS: If lots of people agree on something, together they can decide it is true.

Similarly, individuals can develop Personal Illusion Support Systems (excuse the acronym), trying to fit new information into a belief structure while ignoring conflicting information as biased or conspiratorial. If it does not fit, it must not be true.

In a world of glossy desktop publishing and entertaining television ads, it is easier to be impressed by the package than the contents. Add a bit of religious fervor, and most of us are easily converted.

"Learning without thinking is useless," Confucius said. "Thinking without learning is

dangerous." Millions of people know just enough about nutrition to be dangerous.

Between us, we have spent more than 50 years learning about nutrition and health, yet we are constantly humbled by how much more there is to know. The real experts in the field rarely exude religious zeal. They understand the complexity of things at a depth that prevents emboldened statements of great certainty.

In Hawaii we have real nutrition experts who are respected in the scientific world but relatively unknown here. Throughout this year, "Health Options" will highlight some of them.

Also, to suggest a topic for this column, write "Health Options," Features Department, Honolulu Star Bulletin, 7 Waterfront Plaza, Honolulu 96813 or e-mail titch@hawaii.edu.

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