

March 2009

Children's Health Initiative

Yo Red Bull: List the Caffeine

Slainte! Na Zdrowie! Here's to your good health!

In that spirit, and with much fanfare, I recently introduced my **Children's Health Initiative**, a package of 8 bills designed to improve the health of young adults. Key features of the package require caffeine labeling on energy drinks, education and testing on the use of steroids among student athletes, and the elimination of a subsidy on junk food with proceeds to fund dental care for children.

SB 230, the caffeine content bill, has gained the most attention.

America has an epidemic in child obesity and diabetes, and the principal causes are poor eating habits and lack of exercise. Since an ounce of prevention beats a pound of cure, much of my package focuses on education and prevention.

If you haven't noticed, Energy Drinks are increasingly popular among kids. Sales are growing 47% a year, and most of these drinks are loaded with caffeine and sugar. Producers are required to list the amount of calories, sodium, and sugar on the label. But there is no requirement to list the amount of caffeine, which is the most active ingredient in the drink. Some of these products are classified as dietary supplements, and are virtually unregulated.

I don't know too many parents who let their young children drink coffee. But what is going on right under their nose, without their realizing it, is far worse.

I know our economy is a mess, and people need jobs. But I think children's health is also important. Unfortunately, we promote a very unhealthy lifestyle for kids. It's bad for them physically and will eventually bankrupt our Health Care System.

Energy drinks are a prominent symptom of our poor nutritional values.

There is an escalating *Caffeine Race* going on in the marketplace today. *Coke* and *Pepsi* contain 35 milligrams of caffeine, and they voluntarily print that on the can. Few others do. *Red Bull*, the most popular energy drink, more than doubles that at 80 milligrams, and that's in an 8 ounce can, compared to *Coke* and *Pepsi's* 12 oz. A can of *Jolt* now clocks in at 280 milligrams of caffeine. Clearly, the race is on, and the competition is headed toward higher and higher concentrations of caffeine for younger and younger kids.

Sports figures are making commercials promoting a 2 oz bottle of *5 Hour Energy*, available on the counter of convenience stores. But now we have *6 Hour Energy*. If that's not enough, allow me to introduce you to *7 Hour Energy*. To my horror, one of my interns brought me in a bottle of *80 Hour Energy*. It isn't even a drink. It is a spray you shoot under your tongue.

How long before we start providing kids with a syringe?

Think I'm exaggerating?

Consider some of the names of these products. They come straight from the Drug Culture.

There's *Blow*, and *Buzzwater*. There's *Dopamine*, *Wired*, and *Fixx*, which packs 500 milligrams in a 20 oz can. There is even a drink called *Cocaine*, dubbed, "The Legal Alternative."

Perhaps the next product will be named *Crystal Methamphetamine*.

I think the message to kids is pretty clear.

It's a message that says a high, or a rush, can be had in a bottle or a spray. The more the better. That's why I find the concentrated drinks, with high caffeine in a small amount of liquid, to be

especially pernicious. It's physically difficult to down two 20 oz cans of liquid. But remember your first beer, and the macho competition to see who could drink the most?

That's what kids do.

And concentrated caffeine makes it that much easier to overdo. Especially since the drinks are frequently combined with alcohol.

It should be no surprise that a new study found a surprising number of caffeine overdose reports to a Chicago poison control center. Researchers reported 265 cases of caffeine abuse in a 3 year period. 12 % of the cases required a trip to the hospital.

In October, 100 of the nation's leading doctors and scientists wrote a letter to the Food and Drug Administration, asking that these drinks be required to print caffeine content on the label, that a limit be established for the amount of caffeine in drinks, and that a warning label be required. To date no action has been taken.

My bill simply requires producers to list the amount of caffeine their drink contains. I am a Democrat, but I got the two doctors in the Senate, both Republicans, to cosponsor my caffeine bill. You have a right to know the ingredients of your drink, and your kid's. It should be on the label.

It's a Free Country.

So choose your poison.

But without the facts, your choice isn't really free.

Steroid Abuse

While some athletes hawk energy drinks to your kids, others have been getting into trouble over steroids. My Initiative also includes 3 bills addressing steroid abuse. I offer a spectrum of solutions, ranging from simple education to random testing. Authorities, like the Michigan High School Athletic Association, are in denial and not ready to aggressively confront the problem. They do not support my random testing bill.

Although I think they are wrong, I understand their reluctance. A new University of Michigan survey found that most parents are anxious about testing students for steroids. While 75% support random testing, only 43% believe in reporting individual names of positive tests to the state. This ambivalence is reflected in the general opposition to my bill. *To view the report see www.med.umich.edu/mott/npch.*

I thought about this. I pondered how we might make progress on this issue.

So I have offered SB 278, which requires that the Health/Physical Education class, required for High School graduation, include a component on steroids. It should teach kids what steroids are, how they work, and the dangers of using them.

My two Senate Republican doctor friends have cosponsored this bill. It is a good start towards fighting steroid abuse in High School Sports.

I also proposed an intermediate approach. When students take their school-required physical to participate in football, it should include a urine test for steroids. At this point, a prospective athlete who tests positive might decide to keep his information private and sit out the season. This would clean up the sport without publicly outing a kid who made a bad choice.

Each of my bills represents progress. I hope people will agree that continuing to ignore the steroid problem is not an option.

End Junk Food Subsidy and Fix Cavities

Finally, I have proposed that a sales tax exemption granted to junk food in vending machines 8 years ago, when we were rich, be repealed. I would dedicate the \$25 million from the restoration to extend the **Healthy Kids Dental** program statewide. We provide dental care to kids in 63 of the state's 83 counties right now, but we can't afford to extend the program to Macomb, Oakland and Wayne counties.

In effect, we are subsidizing junk food by making it tax exempt. I would remove the subsidy and fix the rotten teeth kids get from eating junk food. We might even make a dent in skyrocketing diabetes and obesity rates.

This bill faces an uphill fight, but in my mind it is only fair. Why should the state be subsidizing junk food? While I enjoy eating snacks myself, I don't think the state should promote them with a subsidy.

Those are the highlights of my **Healthy Kids Agenda**. Its passage would result in a healthier Michigan.