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June 21, 2004

The Honorable David M. Walker
Comptroller General
U.S. General Accounting Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Walker:

Researchers from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recently reported in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* that poor diet and physical inactivity caused 400,000 deaths in the United States in the year 2000, and tobacco caused 435,000 deaths. The researchers concluded that “poor diet and physical inactivity may soon overtake tobacco as the leading cause of death.”¹

Because the scope of the obesity problem has major implications for research and policy, it is critically important that the CDC’s estimates are based upon the best available science. According to a May 7 article in *Science*, some scientists have raised concerns about the report’s methodology. These concerns appear to stem from differences in the way that the obesity estimate and the tobacco estimate were calculated. *Science* also reported that there were “very contentious” internal agency discussions of this analysis.²

Last year, at the request of Rep. Richard Burr, the General Accounting Office reviewed CDC’s estimate of the number of Americans who die from tobacco-related causes each year. GAO found that the agency used acceptable methodology and its results were reasonable.³

¹Ali H. Mokdad, et al., *Actual Causes of Death, 2000*, Journal of the American Medical Association, 1238-1245 (Mar. 10, 2004).

²Eliot Marshall, *Public Enemy Number One; Tobacco or Obesity?*, *Science*, 804 (May 7, 2004).

³General Accounting Office, *CDC’s 2002 Report on the Health Consequences of Smoking* (July 17, 2003).

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I request that GAO perform a similar analysis of CDC's estimate of mortality from obesity. Specifically, I request that GAO assess:

- The methodology of the CDC report, including concerns raised by internal and external scientists;
- The process of internal review of the report at CDC; and
- The broader question of how to develop a consistent methodology for comparing preventable causes of death.

GAO can play an important role in addressing concerns in the scientific community about the findings of this important paper.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Henry A. Waxman". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Henry A. Waxman
Ranking Minority Member