

## July 2017 Member Highlight Interview for ASN Nutrition Notes eNewsletter

### *Interview with Marion Nestle, Professor of Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health at New York University and Advisor for the ASN Early Career Nutrition (ECN) Interest Group*

Dr. Nestle is the Paulette Goddard Professor of Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health at New York University, where she has been since 1988. She is also a professor of Sociology at NYU and a visiting professor of Nutritional Sciences at Cornell University. Recently, she won writing and literary awards from the James Beard Foundation and the International Association of Culinary Professionals for her most recent book, *Soda Politics: Taking on Big Soda (and Winning)*.



#### **1. *How did you first get involved in nutrition epidemiology and research? What made you interested in the field of nutrition science?***

My doctorate is in molecular biology (nucleic acid enzymology) so I have longstanding experience in science. My first teaching job was in the Biology Department at Brandeis University, where I ran the undergraduate biology laboratory courses and taught molecular and cell biology to majors and premeds.

The department was unusual in having two teaching rules: you could only teach the same course three times in a row (so you stayed fresh), and you had to teach whatever the department needed (because you knew more than undergraduates). When my three years of cell biology were up and it was time for me to switch courses, it turned out that students had been petitioning the department to teach human biology courses. I was offered a choice of human physiology or human nutrition, and picked nutrition.

This was in the mid-1970s. Two-time Nobel Prize winner Linus Pauling had just published *Vitamin C and the Common Cold*, and Frances Moore Lappé's *Diet for a Small Planet* was on the best seller list. Michael Jacobson had just launched Center for Science in the Public Interest and published *Food for People, Not for Profit*, a book of essays about food topics that could have been written yesterday. I picked nutrition to teach because I was curious to know whether there was any science behind any of this.

To find out, I started reading the literature. I soon discovered that there is plenty of science but that humans make terrible experimental animals. Methods are imprecise and results hard to interpret. Whereas teaching cell and molecular biology means teaching students to accept abstractions that they cannot see, taste, smell, or feel, teaching nutrition was fun—and a fabulous way to teach critical thinking in biology. In those days, any undergraduate could read a nutrition research paper and see inadequacies in methods or interpretation. It was like falling in love and I've never looked back.

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### 2. *When and why did you first join ASN? What convinced you to join the organization?*

I left Brandeis for a job teaching nutrition to medical students at UCSF, where we created a coordinated program we called Nutrition UCSF. I worked with faculty in various specialties to put that together. We had a federal grant to teach nutrition to medical students and physicians. Some of the faculty were involved in developing nutrition support teams to work with hospitalized patients. I worked with them to establish the Northern California chapter of the American Society for Parenteral and Enteral Nutrition and started going to its meetings. At one of them, I met Lyn Howard (from Albany Medical College), and she suggested I join the American Society for Clinical Nutrition and the American Institute for Nutrition, the ASN forerunners. She sponsored my applications, and I felt honored when they were accepted. This must have been in the early 1980s, but I can't find a record of the exact year.

### 3. *What aspects of ASN membership have you found most useful, professionally? What other aspects of your membership do you find useful as your career has progressed?*

I came into the nutrition field from outside it and didn't know who was who or what was what for a long time. I should add that toward the end of my sojourn at UCSF it was clear that I needed nutrition credentials and I did a master's in public health nutrition at Berkeley. I did my public health field work as a consultant for the Agency for International Development in Southeast Asia, and went from there to Washington, DC as senior nutrition policy advisor to the Department of Health and Human Services, where I edited the 1988 Surgeon General's Report on Nutrition and Health. For one regrettable reason or another, I've never been able to attend annual meetings regularly so my main contact with ASN has been through its journals. I mostly know ASN members through other professional routes.

### 4. *What aspects of your research do you foresee being most important for ASN members?*

The most important one has to do with conflicts of interest. I've been increasingly concerned about the damage to the reputation of nutrition researchers caused by financial ties to food companies with a vested interest in the outcome of their research. I was embarrassed for our profession by Michele Simon's report: "*Nutrition Scientists on the Take from Big Food: Has the American Society for Nutrition Lost All Credibility?*" I spoke about my concerns at the initial meeting of ASN's current "truth" committee and am looking forward to its forthcoming report.

### 5. *Can you tell us more about your current position and the research activities in which you are involved?*

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I am answering these questions a couple of months before I officially retire from NYU after 29 years, although I don't expect much to change in my professional life. I am keeping my office and title for a few more years, at least. My current book project is about the effects of food industry funding of nutrition research and practice. This is a long-standing concern that I've been writing about occasionally since 2001, including in *Soda Politics*. I decided to do the book after reading the *New York Times*' front-page story on Coca-Cola's funding of investigators behind the Global Energy Balance Network, whose leaders argued that physical inactivity is more important than overeating in determining body weight. This book will have a chapter about the reputational risks of ASN's financial ties to food companies.

**6. *What do you feel are the biggest challenges facing nutrition researchers today? Are there any areas where you would like to see more research?***

I've always believed that the most intellectually challenging problem in our field is determining what people actually eat. Everyone other than nutrition professionals thinks getting dietary information is easy and so is relating it to chronic disease risk. But I think formulating research questions and designing studies to answer questions about diet and health are enormously difficult and I have great respect for everyone who takes on such questions. That's the intellectual challenge.

The more practical challenge is the need for fully independent funding. Federal funding for nutrition research is limited and the cuts threatened by the Trump Administration will only make the need more critical. Without independent funding, the nutrition research agenda gets skewed in favor of projects food companies can use for marketing. The big research questions are to define dietary patterns that promote health, find ways to provide healthful diets to people who lack resources, and identify effective dietary approaches to preventing noncommunicable diseases.

**7. *Is there anything else you'd like to tell ASN members, especially students and postdocs?***

This is a field that badly needs well trained researchers who can tackle the complex biological, social, and political issues related to food and nutrition on the research agenda. These are tough issues to address and they need all the help they can get. I'm planning to end my book about food industry funding with advice to stakeholders. My advice to students and postdocs is to be careful about accepting research funding from any company that has even the remotest interest in the outcome of their studies. The evidence that industry funding influences research outcome is overwhelming and undeniable. Furthermore, recipients are unconscious of the influence, making protection

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difficult. If at all possible, find another source of funding. If your research supervisor insists that you accept industry funding, consider working with another research supervisor. Credibility and integrity matter a lot at every career stage. You might as well start yours out right.

*Dr. Nestle's research and writing examine scientific and socioeconomic influences on food choice, obesity, and food safety, emphasizing the role of food marketing. Her interests in nutrition and food policy and politics include food and nutrition policy development and analysis (domestic and international), with a focus on dietary guidance, social and environmental influences on food choice, and the effects of food industry marketing on diet and health; and communicating information about the links among agriculture, food, nutrition, and health to students, professionals, and the public. Since 2002, she has written eight books on such topics. Her next book, tentatively titled "Buying Nutrition Science: How Food Industry Sponsorship Skews Research and Harms Public Health," will be published by Basic Books late in 2018.*