

USDA's Dietary Guidelines: Health Goals Meet Politics

by Marion Nestle, Ph.D., M.P.H.

Faced with the unanimity of dietary advice during the past decade, many of my colleagues find dietary recommendations to be boring. I do not. The recent controversy over publication of the USDA Food Pyramid should convince even the most skeptical that dietary guidance is an intensely interesting and vitally important issue for scholars as well as advocates.

Diet and Health

To review the basic observations: chronic diseases related to diet -- coronary heart disease, certain cancers, adult-onset diabetes, and stroke among others -- constitute the leading causes of deaths among adults in this country, in industrialized countries throughout the world, and, increasingly, in developing countries as well. A vast body of evidence confirms the value of diet in preventing these conditions and in reducing risk factors for chronic diseases.

Much of this evidence was reviewed in two comprehensive reports published in 1988 and 1989 -- the Surgeon General's Report on Nutrition and Health, on which I worked, and the National Research Council's Diet and Health study. These reports, and the Dietary Guidelines, recommend an increase in the proportion of calories consumed from fruits, vegetables, and grains, and a decrease in the proportion from high-fat meat and dairy foods.

I must confess that at the time the Surgeon General's Report was published four years ago, I was convinced that we had reached consensus, that the previous decade of controversy over dietary recommendations had come to an end, and that policy makers should now stop focusing on the scientific debates and, instead, should turn their attention to ways to implement dietary recommendations, especially among the segments of the population most at risk for chronic disease -- low-income and certain minority groups.

As the Pyramid controversy demonstrated, this view was naive, at best. I now believe that the core recommendations to eat less fat and saturated fat, recommendations unchanged

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since the American Heart Association first published them in 1961, remain under attack and continue to require eternal vigilance to protect them.

Dietary Recommendations

The nature of the controversy is easy to explain. Prior to the mid 1970s, dietary recommendations advised the public to eat more of foods from various groups in order to prevent nutritional deficiencies. For the most part, these recommendations were readily accepted and were supported by the food industry as well as consumer groups. In fact, the National Dairy Council became the primary distributor of the USDA's Four Food group guide.

This situation changed drastically as chronic diseases replaced deficiency diseases as leading causes of death. Instead of advising people to eat more, the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs told people in 1977 to reduce intake of fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, salt, and sugar -- in other words, to eat less. And that meant trouble.

At issue is the impact of this advice on meat, dairy, and egg producers. These foods provide much of the total fat and saturated fat, and all of the cholesterol, in the U.S. food supply. According to USDA figures, meat provides 32 percent of the total fat and 40 percent of the saturated fat in the American food supply. Dairy products provide 12 percent of the total fat and 20 percent of the saturated fat. The combined total for these foods is 44 percent of the total fat, 60 percent of the saturated fat, and 100 percent of the cholesterol in the American food supply.

The message is clear. Dietary recommendations cannot suggest that people reduce intake of meat and dairy foods without eliciting more trouble than the advice may be worth.

If we advise the public to eat less fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol, we necessarily must advise them to eat less meat, dairy foods, and eggs. It should come as no surprise that meat and dairy producers worked so hard to get the USDA to withdraw the Pyramid guide.

Although the Pyramid and the Dietary Guidelines have survived food industry criticisms, I believe they have done so at a price. Let's look, for example at the evolution of federal recommendations for consumption of meat, starting with the Dietary Goals.

Evolving Guidelines

In February 1977, the meat recommendation in the Dietary Goals was quite explicit. It said: "decrease consumption of meat." After a storm of protest, the advice was changed just ten months later to read: "choose meats ... which will reduce saturated fat intake," a subtle but significant difference.

In 1979, the Public Health Service published Healthy People: the Surgeon General's Report on Health Promotion and

Disease Prevention. Its nutrition recommendations included the advice to "eat relatively ... less meat." These were fighting words, and this was the last Public Health Service publication to use the work "less" when referring to meat.

That same year in 1979, the USDA Food Book and Hassle-Free Guide advised: "cut down on fatty meats." This comment caused so much protest that the U.S. Department of Agriculture discontinued the publication, despite its great popularity.

To reach a compromise, the Departments of Agriculture and of Health, Education, and Welfare produced the first edition of the Dietary Guidelines in 1980. The Guidelines used the euphemism: "choose lean meat," but serious protests followed anyway. Nevertheless, the 1985 second edition retained the phrase "choose lean meat," as did the 1988 Surgeon General's Report. By this time, there was little reaction, perhaps because of increasing consensus on the strength of the scientific evidence.

But there may be another reason for the tempering of food industry protest. By this time, the need to soften the meat recommendation had become internalized in federal documents. The 1990 Dietary Guidelines rephrased the meat recommendation in even more positive terms: "have 2 or 3 servings, with a daily total of about 6 ounces."

When the USDA's Pyramid reverted to "choose lean meat," and placed meat high up in the narrow peak of the triangle, some meat producers protested, even though the Pyramid text advised 2 to 3 daily servings and raised the total to 5-7 ounces.

In other words, since 1977, federal dietary advice has shifted from "eat less meat" to the far more positive "eat 2-3 servings." The message is clear. Dietary recommendations cannot suggest that people reduce intake of meat and dairy foods without eliciting more trouble than the advice may be worth.

Confused Consumers

And why does this issue matter? We live at a time when the gap between public knowledge of nutrition and public dietary behavior get wider and wider. There are many reasons for this gap: the poor economy, the widening income disparity between rich and poor, more women working, everyone working longer hours, increasing dependence on food outside the home, and others.

Of particular concern is the food marketing system. Since 1985, the American food supply has provided 3600 calories per day for every man, woman, and child in this country. This amount is nearly twice as much as is needed by the average woman, and a third more than that needed by an average man (and an astonishing 43 percent of these calories come from fat). The average supermarket contains 30,000 food items. More than 13,000 new food items enter the food supply every year. The choices are overwhelming.

With the government telling the public to be sure to consume 2-3 portions each of meat and dairy foods every day, and dietitians saying that all foods can be part of healthy diets, it is no wonder that consumers find it hard to make healthy diet choices.

Given that chronic diseases remain the primary health problem here and throughout much of the world, we need to find ways to depoliticize dietary recommendations. The scientific consensus still is that reduced fat intake would improve the health of the public. But to what level? We are hearing more and more that the 30 percent target level for fat as a percent of calories has been based not on science, but on what people could realistically be expected to do. More and more experts are saying that the evidence all along has supported a level of 20-25 percent or less. Such a level would require even greater shifts in eating patterns.

Let's encourage federal dietary advice to reflect the best possible consensus based on science, not politics. The National Cancer Institute's Five-A-Day campaign is one step in the right direction, and it deserves much support. So do attempts to promote Mediterranean or Asian-style diets based on minimally processed fruits, vegetables, and grain, with meat and dairy foods used as condiments. And so do efforts to bring federal agriculture policies into line with health and nutritional concerns.

As nutrition educators, we need to encourage the government to develop dietary advice that addresses all of these concerns. This task may not be easy, but it is well worth the trouble.

Education Snapshot

	Goal	Actual
Percentage of population able to identify relationship between:		
Fat intake and Heart Disease	75	74
Sodium and hypertension	75	64
Fiber and Cancer	75	25
Number of states requiring nutrition education at the elementary and secondary level:	50	19
Percentage of overweight persons (18 years and older):		
Male	10	25.7
Female	17	25.9

Goals are those set for 1990 by the 1979 Surgeon General's report, *Healthy People*.

Source: Health United States 1991 and Prevention Profile, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.