Nutrition Data Require High Research Priority

Reprinted from "Food Composition, Food Supply, and Dietary Intake Data Require a High Priority on the Nutrition Research Agenda," by Marion Nestle, Ph.D., M.P.H. Dr. Nestle is the chair of New York University's Department of Nutrition, Food, and Hotel Management. This paper was prepared for a recent White House-sponsored meeting on "Health Safety, and Food for America" (CNI: 11/25/94).

Accurate information about the dietary intake of Americans is essential for regulatory decision-making, program planning, and research designed to improve the nutritional status and overall health of the population. Such information constitutes the basis of epidemiologic and clinical research on nutrition and health; it underlies policies and programs designed to provide dietary advice for the general public, assess progress toward achievement of national nutrition objectives, establish food fortification policies, and determine levels of food assistance, to cite only a few examples.

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Assessment of the dietary intake of individuals or population groups at an acceptable degree of scientific rigor presents research problems of formidable complexity. Because of the many biological, behavioral, environmental, socioeconomic, and cultural factors that affect dietary intake, each of the commonly-used assessment methods is limited in its ability to yield reliable information, and results obtained by any one method are not necessarily comparable to those obtained by another. The accurate assessment of food and nutrient intake is one of the most intellectually challenging problems faced by contemporary nutrition researchers. Improvement of dietary assessment methods — and better federal coordination of surveys that use existing methods — are issues that deserve a very high priority on the nutrition research agenda.

The issue of coordination is particularly vexing. Ever since the 1969 White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health, researchers and policymakers have called repeatedly for a coordinated, comprehensive plan to provide timely and accurate data on the food intake and nutritional status of Americans. Finally, in 1990, Congress established the current National Nutrition Monitoring and Related Research System. Today, this system is implemented by 20 or so federal agencies that conduct more than 70 distinct national surveys that collect information about health and nutritional status, food and nutrient intake, food composition, dietary knowledge and attitudes, foods available for purchase, and sociodemographic and economic indicators related to dietary intake.

Despite the large number and broad scope of these activities, the overall system fails to meet basic data needs in several key areas. As detailed in a 1994 report from the General Accounting Office, the current monitoring system fails to establish priorities, assess the value of existing activities, produce consistent and comparable data, or provide information about the status or needs of certain high-risk groups. Three data sources are of particular concern:

Food composition: At issue is the continued integrity of the Department of Agriculture's (USDA's) food composition data base. Determination of dietary intake requires data on consumption of foods to be converted to data on energy and nutrients. This is done through reference to the USDA's food composition data base (e.g., Handbook 8). To be scientifically valid, data on the nutrient and energy content of foods must be obtained and analyzed under standardized conditions. Currently, USDA obtains much of its data from food manufacturers, mainly because it maintains the entire data base on an annual budget of under $1 million, of which just $200,000 is available for food analyses obtained by contract. As a result, many food composition values are missing, imputed, or based on single samples, raising questions about the accuracy of dietary survey results. Unless funding is increased to an appropriate level, this critically important data base is at grave risk.

Food Supply (Disappearance): Since 1909, the USDA has published annual data on the per capita availability for consumption of selected commodities in the food supply. These data reflect the amounts of foods produced in the U.S., plus imports, less exports. Because purchased foods are not necessarily consumed, supply data are generally believed to overestimate dietary intake. If the methods used to collect the data are comparable from year to year, however, supply data can provide useful information about time trends in patterns of food use and, therefore, can suggest trends in energy and nutrient consumption. Because these data are the only source of information about long-term food trends, USDA should be enabled to collect and disseminate comparable information on the supply of as many foods as possible on an annual basis.

Dietary Intake Surveys: Of continued concern is the need to fully coordinate the major dietary intake surveys conducted

by USDA (the National Food Consumption Survey and the Continuing Survey of Food Intake of Individuals) and the Department of Health and Human Service (the National Health and Nutrition Examination Surveys). In 1977, Congress first directed the two agencies to standardize their data collection methods. Some progress has been made in the intervening 17 years, but further coordination to ensure data comparability continues to remain an urgent national need.

The importance of these data bases to food and nutrition research, planning, and regulatory policies cannot be overestimated. The food composition and food supply data bases, and the dietary intake surveys, require focused attention and adequate funding levels to ensure that they are able to yield the accurate and timely data so vitally needed as a basis for rational policy decisions.

Research Notes

Obesity Parents who control their children's intake of food may be driving them to obesity, according to a new study. University of Illinois researchers used a questionnaire to determine the degree of control the parents of 77 preschoolers exerted over their food intake. They then gave the preschoolers aged three to five a high or low-calorie fruit drink and allowed the children to eat as much as they liked for lunch. The researchers found that the preschoolers with less controlling parents were more likely to adjust their food intake according to the drink. The children who did not adjust their intake tended to be obese. (*Pediatrics*: Vol. 94, no. 5; November 1994; pp. 653-661.)

Briefly Noted

Tyson Foods The nation's largest poultry processor, Tyson Foods Inc., has become a focus of independent counsel Donald Smaltz' investigation into U.S. Department of Agriculture Secretary Mike Espy's alleged wrongdoings. Smaltz and his growing team of attorneys has in the past few weeks interviewed Tyson employees and issued numerous subpoenas for company information which might shed light on the relationship between Tyson and the USDA. Tyson, meanwhile, in a statement complained that Smaltz is "taking off on a politically motivated witch hunt" against the company. Smaltz responded in *The Washington Post* that he is focusing on whether Tyson or other companies provided gratuities to any USDA official, but that he is "not going to rule anything out."

Labels Retail food labels on the whole accurately represent their actual nutrient contents, according to a study conducted by the Food and Drug Administration and reported by the Associated Press. FDA Commissioner David Kessler announced this week that of 300 randomly selected foods taken off grocery shelves, 87 percent of all nutrients labeled were accurate, with 94 and 93 percent accuracy for fat and calories, respectively. Foods made and sold locally, however, are more likely to misrepresent their contents, said the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a nutrition advocacy group.

Awards World Hunger Year is seeking submissions for its annual Harry Chapin Media Awards "honoring media excellence in reporting on hunger, poverty, and self-reliance." Cash prizes between $1,000 and $2,500 are awarded in each of the following categories: books, newspapers, periodicals, television/film, photojournalism, and radio. For more information, call World Hunger Year at (212) 629-8850.

Resources The National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (part of the National Institutes of Health) has published an educational materials catalog. The catalog contains information on publications on a variety of subjects including obesity, heart attack, asthma, and sleep disorders. To receive the catalog contact the Institute's Information Center, P.O. Box 30105, Bethesda, MD 20824-0105.

Meetings The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services is calling for abstracts to be used for breakout sessions and poster presentations as part of the International Congress on Hazardous Waste: Impact on Human and Ecological Health set for June 5-8, 1995 in Atlanta, Georgia. Abstracts are needed in such subject areas as source reduction, policy, health and ecological effects, risk assessment, exposure, and community involvement. For more information contact John Andrews at the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, 1600 Clifton Road, NE (E-28), Atlanta, Georgia, 30333.

The Soil and Water Conservation Society is sponsoring three one-day meetings on January 13, 27, and February 10, 1995 to discuss the scientific and technical basis for agricultural and environmental policies in light of the 1995 Farm Bill. The meetings will be followed by a conference March 9-10 to explore conservation policies and programs that might be incorporated into the 1995 Farm Bill. Congressional and government staff, public and private interests are invited. For more information call the Society at 1-800-THE-SOIL.

The International Society for the Study of Fatty Acids and Lipids is holding its second International Congress June 7-10,