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NATIONAL FOOD AND NUTRITION POLICIES IN THE UNITED STATES

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The objective of a national nutrition policy is to develop a workable, coordinated plan for actions that will result in improved nutritional status for the population. Improved nutritional status leads to improved health, leads to a healthier work force, leads to better business, leads to a healthier economic situation, and so forth.

In my opinion, the development of national food and nutrition policies in the United States has been and continues to be a very slow process. One of the reasons for this slow development is that no group or organization has the mandate to develop and implement these policies. Only the national government is at the center of all these influences — people, agencies, organizations, etc. — which determine the food and nutrition policies for our nation. This means that these policies are intimately involved in politics, and, as we all know, the political arena is incredibly complex.

Another major problem in developing national nutrition policies is data: an excess in some areas, not enough in other areas, and conflicting data elsewhere. We don't have enough information on the health status, over time, of the population, on a very regular basis. We have conflicting information on how much we should weigh for longevity purposes, on the role of cholesterol in heart disease, and on the role of diet in other chronic diseases, i.e., hypertension, cancer, etc. We have an abundance of information on income, food purchases, hospitalizations, physician office visits, even on garbage. We also have many ways to interpret the available data, but we don't usually interpret it in ways that are useful to other professions or meaningful to the general public.

An important component of the general public is our congressional members. In the complex legislative process, many voices compete to be heard. We in the food and nutrition system need to be more active in communicating with Congress. In 1978, Congressman Wampler, representing the 9th District of Virginia, made these comments about the need for legislative involvement by professionals:

The problem — as I see it — is not what the people are telling

Congress, but rather what knowledgeable professionals are *not* telling Congress. Too often the men and women who can provide answers or at least point Congress in the right direction don't want to get involved. . . .so the people who should be heard aren't.

I agree with the Congressman from Virginia. In my opinion, it is important to aim at influencing the consumption of food, in the desired direction, with regard to nutrition and health.

Government, either deliberately and with forethought or by accident and without planning, creates the environment in which consumer choices exist. Agriculture, land use, taxation, imports, exports, subsidies, etc., do determine what food is available and at what price. Food availability and price, in turn, determine to a large extent our national dietary patterns.

Over time, the American government has never chosen to address this question head on. In fact, even when the opportunity to do so was fairly obvious, the issue of affecting consumer choice was avoided. For example, food stamp legislation could have been used as a vehicle to influence the selection of foods that appear on the American table, but it was not. It is possible to integrate nutritional goals into the general economic policy and, even further, into subsidies. Other countries, including Norway, have done this. Policies, backed by action, related to implementing specific dietary goals do not have to be viewed as a means of control or of "telling people what to eat," but as a means of influencing life styles and making the healthier choices also the easier and less expensive choices.

I'd like to address a few specific food and nutrition policy issues that could impact you and on which you may be able to have an impact.

National Nutrition Monitoring

The term "nutrition monitoring" refers to a variety of coordinated activities designed to assess the nutritional health of the population as well as provide timely information that can be used to promote better nutrition. You may think that we are already doing this. We aren't!

The National Nutrition Monitoring and Related Research Act of 1985, HR 2436, was introduced in Congress on May 8, 1985, by Representatives Mackay (Fla.), Walgren (Pa.), and Brown (Calif.) and was referred to the House Science and Technology Committee and the Agriculture Committee. Senator Bingaman of New Mexico has introduced a similar bill in the Senate, S 1569. In addition to monitoring nutritional health, the bill includes a comprehensive plan for the assessment of the nutritional quality of the United States food supply.

The three federal agencies currently doing separate pieces of nutrition monitoring are the Department of Health and Human Services

(DHHS), the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), and the United States Department of Defense (USDOD). Their activities are not coordinated, are often duplicative, and do not provide timely information.

For example, DHHS has conducted two national health and nutrition examination surveys (NHANES), 1971–74 and 1976–80. A similar two-year survey of Hispanics (HHANES) was completed in 1984. Each of these surveys collected data on dietary intake, biochemical information (cholesterol, blood sugar, blood iron, pesticide levels, etc.), heights, weights, and other factors on approximately 21,000 people. Most of the data from both NHANES was six to ten years old when it was finally evaluated and released. Some of the data has still not been analyzed and released. The first HHANES data will be presented in November, 1985, at the American Public Health Association (APHA) annual meeting in Washington, D.C.

USDA has done periodic national food consumption surveys about every ten years - most recently 1977–80. This survey describes the nutritional quality of United States diets and measures food consumption of various groups of people. Again the analysis and release of information is not timely. The next survey is to begin in 1987. For the first time the Association of State and Territorial Public Health Nutrition Directors (ASTPHND), my counterparts in other states, have been asked to review the proposed survey instrument and suggest ways to make the data more useful.

The Department of Defense has had a Nutrition Division since World War I. It monitors the nutritional status of military personnel, but its information gathering and analysis is not coordinated with other agencies. None of the three departments coordinate with each other; none of them collect data in such a manner that their data could be compared; they appear to barely speak to each other. One of the key issues is certainly “turf.” Current monitoring efforts are untimely, not coordinated, costly, and don’t provide information about high risk groups.

HR 2436, if passed, would mandate a comprehensive plan to assess nutritional status on a continuing basis and assure coordination of efforts among all federal agencies. It would, for the first time in United States history, give us baseline data on our population — the first step in developing national nutrition policies based on timely data rather than “intuition” or special interest lobbying efforts.

The ongoing, continuous monitoring efforts would also permit rapid, timely feedback on the effects of natural disasters, such as the freeze we had in Texas in January, 1984; or cuts in food assistance programs; or increasing unemployment; or severe food shortages. This information also could be used to aid in program evaluation and targeting of resources.

Hunger

This has been a topic of critical interest thus far in the 1980s. The last time hunger received so much attention in the United States was in the 1960s when hunger and malnutrition were found to be common throughout our country. As a result of the findings in the 1960s, food assistance programs received greater emphasis and funding via food stamps, commodities, school breakfast and lunch programs, and eventually the Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC). When budget cuts occurred in the early 1980s, hunger again reared its ugly head.

A major problem in trying to figure out if hunger is a problem in the United States, and, if so, how big a problem, is lack of data. How do you measure hunger? How do you even define hunger? Hunger and malnutrition are not reportable conditions like measles or tuberculosis. How can you address this issue when you have no hard numbers, lots of politics, and lots of special interest groups? If we had had a national nutrition monitoring system in place by the late 1970s we would have been able to tell if hunger was having an effect on the growth and development of our population.

One of the key nutrition and health policy issues that needs to be addressed by professionals on a multidisciplinary basis is the extent of hunger in the United States — estimated by some to affect as many as 20 million people. In order to eliminate hunger in our country as well as in the world, we need to develop innovative, low cost solutions rather than ignoring the problem due to the lack of “hard” numbers, and rather than developing more bureaucracy, and more rules and regulations.

The Dietary Guidelines/Goals

Less fat, less sugar, less salt, less alcohol, fewer additives, calories, and processed foods, more fiber, more polyunsaturated fats, more food variety — these seven USDA/HHS guidelines are not going to go away. As a matter of fact, I see them getting more specific in the future. The consumer is demanding more information to make better food choices and eventually this will be reflected even more in the national dietary guidelines. These guidelines are certainly having an impact on agriculture and health and will continue to do so.

In addition to these guidelines, the American Heart Association has issued heart health dietary goals and the American Cancer Society has presented dietary modifications that may reduce one's risk of developing cancer. Consumers are demanding foods that will comply with these dietary guidelines.

Farming

There is indeed a farm policy dilemma. Large farms versus small farms. Increased yield on less land by newer plant varieties. Less demand for beef yet improved technology for producing beef. Federal price supports versus budget cuts. Food surpluses; the international trade system. You know your industry much better than I, and in a way, that's part of the problem. Other professionals, myself included; the general public; and legislators don't understand the complexities of the United States farm policy. It is evident that changes need to be made in order to help reduce the national debt. Well-thought-out plans must be implemented to reduce the plight of farmers and yet not destroy the delicate balance of our national and international food system.

One example I heard cited recently by American Public Health Association President-Elect Dr. William Foege intrigued me. He stated that we are in the business of health and because of that we need to more actively combat the use of tobacco. He's a non-smoking M.D. who has seen the effects of smoking on health. He also states that the tobacco industry is using more tobacco from other countries because it's cheaper than American grown tobacco. So, from either a health or economic perspective, tobacco farmers are doomed. He proposes that time limited tobacco farm subsidies be made available to tobacco farmers to encourage them to change crops and provide the time necessary for them to get established in a new market in which they no longer need the subsidy. It's ideas like this that need your help. Will it work? What will make it better? How can you work with others to educate Congress to make these changes?

Innovation in the farm policy area is desperately needed. You must take the lead in helping the farm economy be more flexible and sensitive to the needs and demands of the health and nutrition conscious consumer.

Summary

As I mentioned earlier, health and agriculture seem to do regular battle. In the past, USDA has indicated that the failure of American agriculture to adjust to changing patterns of food consumption by the United States population is partly due to the lack of understanding of agriculture by nutritionists. Whereas nutritionists indicate that the problem is partly due to a lack of understanding of nutrition by those in agriculture. The bottom line is that we all need to work more closely together. We need more exchange of information. We need to educate each other about our concerns. We need to work together to come up with mutually agreed to solutions that will benefit the health of the

population as a whole. Land grant universities must take the lead in each state to have at least an annual meeting with key food and nutrition professionals to facilitate this information exchange, mutual education, and joint efforts on policy development.

We must remember that nutrition and food policy do not lie within the purview of a single professional discipline. We must work from all areas of the food and nutrition system to influence those policies that affect the consumer's access to nutritious foods.

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