Perspective on Dietary Goals

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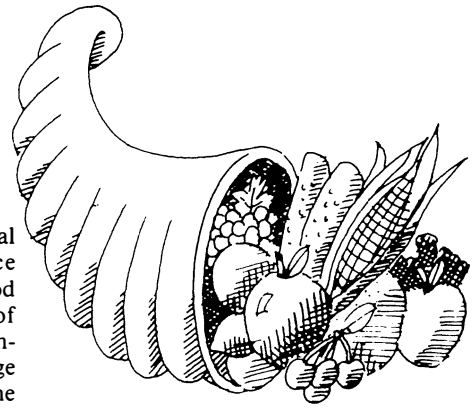

In November 1977, USDA's National Agricultural Outlook Conference devoted a full session to U.S. food policy.[1] Dr. Mark Hegsted, Director of USDA's Human Nutrition Center, concluded then that we were past the stage of argument and should get on with the business of incorporating into the general nutrition message the suggestions contained in a report on national dietary goals by the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs. A year later, his conclusions have not changed. Noting limited progress and sizing up some of the obstacles, he said it is time to get on with the task.[2]

This is not to say that everyone has reached the same conclusion. Some opponents conclude that Americans really have no nutrition-related health problems. Others take the view that we do not know enough to make such recommendations. And some say that the recommended changes in diets and food supplies are too drastic.

Suggested Changes Thought To Be Reasonable

Hegsted contends that the changes suggested by the Dietary Goals are moderate and reasonable. He observed that a great many Americans now appear interested in modifying their diets, and in response, some popular chefs are using cooking methods which pay more attention to the modifications. Comprehensive labeling for calories, salt, sugar, and fat—substances for which the message is to reduce intake—would promote consumer acceptance of the suggested dietary patterns. Hegsted sees no reason to be pessimistic about what we may be able to achieve and no reason to be dogmatic about what the public will or will not accept.

Stressing that the message is simply one of moderation, Hegsted suggests that what everyone needs to realize is that 1) too much of any food is bad, and 2) there really are no good or bad foods—everything depends upon how much we eat and what we eat with it. What the consumer needs is a balanced presentation; neither the current nutrition education program nor commercial advertising have provided that kind of information.

Clearly, the recommendations suggested by the Dietary Goals cannot be achieved in the short run without the cooperation of the food industry and, perhaps, some regulatory changes. The food industry should be encouraged to take responsibility for providing product alternatives more in line with the Dietary Goals and for supporting creative education. With ingenuity and resources, Hegsted feels certain that food and diet patterns more moderate than those now followed can be developed without experiencing precipitous changes in the marketplace.

Rendering "Best Judgments"

Some have argued that since not all individuals are equally susceptible to the effects of dietary fat, cholesterol, salt, etc., dietary advice should be reserved for those who are susceptible. Noting that we do not have the technical capacity to identify which individuals are more or less at risk, Hegsted suggested that the sensible approach is to advise everyone to consume a diet which moderates susceptibility—especially since there are no identifiable risks associated with such recommendations. Holding off advice until there is evidence of susceptibility is the antithesis of prevention.

The criticism that we do not know enough to advise the public seems particicularly odd to Hegsted who notes that nutritionists and others have been making recommendations without "proof" of benefit since Hippocrates. There is virtually no proof that the Recommended Dietary Allowances (RDA's) for protein, vitamins, and minerals are correct; nevertheless, they presumably represent our best judgment, based on whatever sources are available—animal experimentation, clinical trials, epidemiological data, and the like.

It is not a matter of whether we know enough—we never know enough. It is a matter of rendering the "best judgment" possible when problems become evident or significant questions are asked. Such judgments are needed, and the same approach is valid for any dietary constituent.

Our dietary recommendations over the past 50 years, highly effective in eliminating deficiency diseases, were made without benefit of information about the long-term effects of the diet. Today, mounting evidence is linking our major health problems with overnutrition. The four food group message—in essence, to eat more of everything to ensure significant protein, vitamin, and mineral intake—is no longer adequate.

We now face the difficult problem of teaching the population to be more discriminating. It is important for people to recognize that a sound diet provides the necessary nutrients without excess calories, fat, sugar, cholesterol, and salt. According to Hegsted, the public demands and deserves the best judgment possible—given whatever data are available—on the appropriate intakes of specific foods and food constituents.

Like all dietary recommendations, the levels specified in the Dietary Goals are a matter for discussion and refinement. But, Hegsted says, the direction of change suggested by the Senate Select Committee is appropriate by all available evidence and carries no nutritional risk. ■

[1] "1978 Food and Agricultural Outlook," prepared for the Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry, U.S. Senate, December 1977.

[2] Hegsted, D. Mark. "Perspective on Nutrition," presentation at the 1979 National Agricultural Outlook Conference, November 15, 1978.