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# NUTRITION EDUCATION AND RESEARCH

## USDA To Develop Nutrition Messages for Children

USDA has announced that it will develop a pilot multimedia campaign, including television spots, to inform children about good dietary practices.

The effort, costing \$550,000, will be conducted by USDA's Food and Nutrition Service, which administers the school lunch and breakfast programs. This will be the first major Federal government study to explore how nutritional messages in various media can help children improve their dietary practices.

USDA is seeking proposals from advertising agencies, universities, research firms, and others to do research needed for the development of messages, strategies, and materials.

The preliminary testing of the mass media materials began this school year in preparation for testing them on a community-wide basis in the 1979-80 school year.

Representatives of the Children's Television Workshop, the three major television networks, the advertising industry, the food industry, public interest groups, and nutrition educators have helped in developing research guidelines for the campaign.

The USDA's messages will be targeted at children ages 5 to 12 and will encourage them

to eat breakfast, nutritious snacks, and more fruits and vegetables.

## States Get Nutrition Education and Training Funds

USDA has announced that 47 States have received \$24.8 million in nutrition education and training funds for fiscal year 1978 from a Department total of \$26.2 million available for State use.

The funds are to be used by the States to train children, teachers, and school food service personnel in the vital relationship between nutrition, good food, and health.

The grants enabled States to begin operating the program this summer. The advance funds were used to hire State coordinators and to assess each State's nutrition education and training needs.

The nutrition education and training program was enacted last November. Through it, children in the school meal programs and child care food programs will learn about the nutritional value of food; teachers will be instructed in nutrition principles; and school food service workers will be trained in food service management, nutrition, menu planning, food procurement, and food preparation.

## Perspectives on Food and Nutrition Policy

In recent months, USDA has increased its emphasis on food issues. These discussions will likely have an impact on the food and nutrition research agenda and on the policymaking process. Recently, the Secretary of Agriculture

appointed two leaders in the field of food and nutrition to high-level positions: Ms. Audrey Tittle Cross, Nutrition Coordinator for USDA, and Dr. D. Mark Hegsted, Director of USDA's Human Nutrition Center. Their perspectives on important contemporary nutrition issues provide an indication of what issues are likely to be "center stage." Here are some excerpts from an interview with Ms. Cross and Dr. Hegsted.

*Why is there intense concern over human nutrition and the food we eat?*

Cross: To answer that question, I think we have to look back to the civil rights movement when concern over the existence of hunger and malnutrition in this country began. From that awareness arose concern with the scarcity and inadequacy of distributing our food supplies among certain populations. The scientific community responded by beginning investigations of the extent of malnutrition. At that point, research interests in nutrition began to take a different focus. Prior research had focused almost solely on nutrient requirements. The national interest in hunger began to focus research concerns on people and how they ate.

In the process of looking at malnutrition over those 10 years, our affluence as a nation increased and we began to discover not only problems of undernutrition, but also the problems of overnutrition. And

that is where we are today. Scientists are not only looking at problems of food scarcity and inequitable distribution, but also the role of nutrition in positive health and prevention of disease.

There is now a great deal of interest in funding research in the area of human nutrition regarding nutrient needs, food composition, food choices to meet nutrient needs, and dissemination of information to the American public. USDA was delegated the primary responsibility within Government for these nutrition activities.

*Why is there so much controversy in human nutrition?*

Hegsted: I think it's not much different than the other areas of science, but it's an issue that the public is a lot more interested in. As most researchers know, science never proves anything; the scientific method mainly disproves. I think it's a sad fact that a lot of researchers never really want to deal with the decisionmaking process; they prefer to keep on trying to discover additional facts. But there comes a time when decisions have to be made, and to a considerable degree, they involve judgment. That will always be true. But I think you have to recognize that there are commercial interests involved in human nutrition.

I really don't think nutrition is in any more of a state of disagreement than most other sciences, but only that it's a more relevant topic.

*What's the most significant problem in human nutrition?*

Cross: I can only give you an opinion. One of the things I hope our nutrition center will focus on is the behavioral and sociological influences of human nutrition. I'm concerned that consumers are not making informed decisions in the marketplace. They don't have adequate knowledge of nutrition or of the nutrient value of foods. Food doesn't come as vitamin A or vitamin C. It comes, instead, as a tomato or an orange.

Behavior in the marketplace is being influenced by information that isn't based on the best scientific knowledge. For example, companies that are legitimately trying to sponsor their products and to encourage consumer selection of those products are giving only their point of view. There's no counterview or additional information to tell consumers from what source they might get a particular nutrient and what combination of foods they need to eat to meet their nutrient needs. I'm hoping that one of the things we can look at through research is how to better help the consumer in the marketplace.

Hegsted: There's always been an assumption that the school lunch program ought to serve the dual purpose of feeding children and teaching them how to eat. Certainly there's been a lot of talk about that. With Congressional interest in nutrition education, it's obvious now that there will be much more emphasis in that area. But there are some pretty

serious questions still unanswered. One is, do we really know how to influence behavior? Most of the assumption in the past has been that if you teach people the facts about nutrition, they will respond. But we know that people keep smoking even though they know they shouldn't. Obviously they won't eat just for nutrition. It's easy to make a nutritionally adequate diet that nobody will eat. There has to be some research in educational methods and behavioral modification.

*What are the good things about the way Americans eat?*

Hegsted: There are a lot of good things about the way Americans eat. If you compare the disease patterns of the 1930's, obviously you'll see that most people are better off and happier. Certainly it's much better to die of overnutrition than undernutrition. I don't think there's any doubt about that. Being hungry is worse than being fat. Although there are many ways to criticize our diet, we are very fortunate people compared to most, and that ought to be emphasized.

*What's the biggest problem in human nutrition? Is it obesity, cholesterol, undernutrition?*

Hegsted: That's a matter of judgment. Half of Americans have heart disease. About a quarter of them die of cancer. About 10 percent of adults have high blood pressure. It's estimated that 5 percent of Americans have diabetes, and

if it keeps going, it will be 10 percent before very long. If that's the appropriate classification, then the risk factors of heart disease are our primary problems. But most people would rather have a heart attack than have cancer. If you look at the budgets of the cancer institute and the heart institute, you'll find that the cancer budget is higher primarily for that reason.

I would say that in the past, that's the way people have tried to evaluate the relative importance of nutrition when related to disease. I would also say that I think there is some overemphasis on obesity. That is certainly a very prevalent problem, but the risk associated with modest degrees of obesity is not very great in adults. If you compare the data on obesity versus the data of levels of serum cholesterol, you'll find it much worse to have the high cholesterol level than to be a little overweight.

*Are most health problems diet-related?*

Hegsted: There isn't any clear answer to that. Nutrition does play a part in many chronic diseases, but it's not the causative factor. Still, it is a factor. Genetics are very important, but can be modified by diet. So you would have to consider every disease individually. But the fact is that most major health problems of the American public are diet-related.

Cross: One of the reasons I think it's important that

human nutrition research will be conducted by USDA is that research at the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) is conducted by physicians who still tend to be curative rather than prevention oriented. I think that USDA can have a much more preventive focus that also integrates the role of food production and marketing. Hopefully, HEW will join us in doing some positive and preventive things in the whole health care system.

*Are food additives and preservatives hazardous to health?*

Hegsted: That depends upon which food additive and which preservative. I judge the American diet to be as safe in terms of toxins and carcinogens as any available in the world. I think the area of additives and preservatives is one area where we have done a pretty good job. And it's certainly an area of active concern. We don't have an absolute capacity to measure how risky anything really is, so we ought to be conservative. The best policy is to limit those additives and preservatives to those foods where they are necessary or useful. But I think there's overconcern about additives and materials of that kind among the American public.

#### **Wheat Research and Nutrition Education Order To Be Developed**

USDA has announced procedures for developing a

wheat and wheat foods research and nutrition education order.

The order is authorized under the Wheat and Wheat Foods Research and Nutrition Education Act, signed into law September 29, 1977. It is intended to improve quality and make efficient use of American wheat for food purposes.

The rules set procedures for giving all interested persons a chance to have their views considered during various steps in developing an order—from submission of proposals and a public hearing to a final decision. If hearing evidence supports an order, it would be voted on by end-product users of wheat, primarily wholesale bakers.

Any approved program would be financed by assessments of up to 5 cents per hundredweight on the processed wheat that end-product users purchase. Certain end-product users, including retail bakers, would be exempt from paying the assessments. End-product users required to pay assessments, but who do not wish to support the program, could get refunds upon request.

The order, if approved, would be administered by a 20-member Wheat Industry Council. Membership would be divided equally among producers, processors, end-product users, and consumers.