A Healthy America Begins with Reforming the Dietary Guidelines Process

The Dietary Guidelines are meant to answer a simple question: What should Americans eat to be healthy? [1]. Ever since the first dietary recommendations for Americans were released in 1977, their purpose focused not just on adequate nutrition, but the impact of diet on chronic disease [2]. Written by political staffers under the leadership of Senator George McGovern, the 1977 Dietary Goals attributed America’s “epidemic of killer diseases”—obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and cancer—to an increase in fatty and cholesterol-rich foods. These Goals and the USDA Dietary Guidelines that followed instructed Americans to reduce dietary fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol and increase carbohydrate consumption, recommendations that have changed little in three decades [3]. Despite perceptions to the contrary, Americans have shifted their eating habits to conform to these Guidelines; dietary carbohydrate intake has increased, while fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol consumption has decreased to near or below targeted levels [4]. At the same time, the prevalence of overweight and obesity has doubled; diabetes has tripled [5, 6]. Created with the intention of improving the health of Americans, the Dietary Guidelines appear to have had the opposite effect [Figure 1].

The science behind the current recommendations contained in the Dietary Guidelines is weak, untested, and inconsistent. The recommendation for a low-fat, high-carbohydrate eating pattern has remained virtually unchanged in thirty years and has not, by the USDA’s own admission, been tested for health benefits [2]. During that same time, nutrition experts have proposed that:

* “. . . a lower intake of carbohydrate may be better for cardiovascular health” [8].
* "The country's big low-fat message backfired" [9].
* “The low-fat– high-carbohydrate diet. . . may well have played an unintended role in the current epidemics of obesity, lipid abnormalities, type II diabetes, and metabolic syndromes” [10].

As our nation confronts soaring health costs and a declining quality of life, we can no long afford to continue to produce Dietary Guidelines that fail to improve the health of Americans. The process behind the creation of the Dietary Guidelines lacks transparency, openness, and an adequate system of checks and balances. It is an accident of history and politics which allows limitations that originated with the first national dietary recommendations to persist in the face of substantial scientific evidence to the contrary. This process is in critical need of revision. There are no statutes or policy mechanisms to compel the USDA to improve recommendations that have remained unchanged for thirty years and which have not prevented, and which may in fact have contributed to, the soaring rates of obesity and diabetes during that time. Although its nutrition policies have failed to produce the desired outcomes, the USDA bears no responsibility for any damages or expenses that have occurred as a result.

**Figure 1: The rise in obesity in America began after the release of the first Dietary Guidelines in 1980 [7].**

The Dietary Guidelines are a powerful and influential document which shapes all government dietary guidance, dictates nationwide nutrition standards, influences agricultural policies, and directs how food manufacturers target consumer demand. They can be considered the most influential health-related pronouncements in the world, yet their creation is directed by the government agency whose primary mission is to expand and develop markets for US agricultural products, a role which does not include a mandate to protect the health of the American people. The conflicts of interest inherent in this situation must be addressed in light of our current health crisis and its cost to America.

The creation of our Dietary Guidelines must be a deliberate, transparent process, free of bias or conflicts of interest, and should include a system of evaluation based on health outcomes. It is therefore suggested that an independent Office of Food and Nutrition Policy be created by the passage of an Executive Order. The primary responsibility of this office will be the creation of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. The future health of America—including economic health—must begin with reforming our Guideline-making process.

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