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MAINTAINING NAS-NRC CREDIBILITY

This week I had eggs for breakfast—and not just once, but three times, in fact!

As in the case of many Americans who have been diet conscious regarding cholesterol, salt, saturated fats, roughage-fiber, and so on, in recent years I had significantly restricted my intake of cholesterol-rich foods. This regimen was followed in the belief that the risk of coronary disease would be substantially reduced.

But the National Academy of Sciences-National Research Council released a report in late May in which its Food and Nutrition Board said that, in general, there is no reason for a healthy person to reduce his or her intake of cholesterol and fat. Indeed, other than a rather mild caution about daily salt use, the report concluded that there was really no basis for any of the dietary changes of the type noted above.

This conclusion flew in the face of many other reports and recommendations from various other groups that had arrived at an opposite conclusion. For example, just last February the departments of HEW and Agriculture issued dietary guidelines which recommended that healthy Americans should watch how much cholesterol and fat they ate. Most physicians have been influenced by guidelines such as these, and, as such, they have been counseling their patients along these lines for at least the past few years. Consequently, widespread changes have occurred in the dietary practices of a significant portion of the population.

What, then, took place to cause this apparent 180° different conclusion by the NAS-NRC Food and Nutrition Board? They did no new studies; they conducted no new experiments or research; they drew upon no new journal reports or findings. Basically, they just looked at all the same information and data that the other groups had reviewed, but they arrived at quite an opposite conclusion.

Normally, if a single scientist, or even a single group of scientists, disagrees with the mainstream of scientific thought, opinion, or conclusion, little note is taken and little importance is attached. But the NAS-NRC Food and Nutrition Board is not your everyday sort of run-of-the-mill committee.

For example, this same body is responsible for establishing the recommended daily allowances of all vitamins, minerals, and so on that we are constantly reminded of when we see the package labeling for bread, cereals, milk products, and a host of other foods. Beyond their own individual professional credentials, as a group they (FNB members) carry the recognition and reputation of the prestigious NAS-NRC.

But in itself that is no guarantee that biases may not enter the picture. Stories in the public press brought out that the report author, the committee chairman, and a third member who reviewed the report all held paid consultantships with various food producers or food trade organizations. Moreover, several other panel members had connections with the food industry that would appear to render their objectivity suspect in regard to matters with an economic impact on the food industry. Some press reports have highlighted these relationships in an apparent effort to create doubts regarding the scientific objectivity of the FNB's report.

The federal government has made a major effort to eliminate conflict-of-interest considerations from arising within its bodies of advisors as well as staff. But when carried out to its maximum, it becomes difficult to identify highly qualified people because seemingly all the experts have accepted paid industry consultantships or other appointments involving some type of monetary consideration.

We don't know where the truth lies regarding the health hazard of the dietary factors including cholesterol and fat. We suspect that it lies somewhere in between the recent NAS-NRC position and the traditional stand. Perhaps there just aren't sufficient data to make any real decision at this time. But, whatever the case, the NAS-NRC image of prestige and objectivity has now been tarnished in the public eye.

Several years ago, certain elements in the drug industry exerted a major arm-twisting effort to attempt to reverse a position taken by the NAS-NRC Drug Research Board regarding modifying state antitrust laws. The drug industry effort came so close to being successful that the NAS-NRC hierarchy undertook a full-scale review of the matter and decided to abolish the Drug Research Board.

NAS-NRC credibility again appears to be at stake as a result of the FNB report. The voice of science in America is too important and too fragile to allow it to suffer the loss of the NAS-NRC as a respected and trusted beacon of scientific truth. Consequently, we hope that officialdom at NAS-NRC will conduct whatever review or investigation is needed to ascertain the objectivity of its FNB's conclusions and recommendations. And, further, we hope that it will institute stringent measures in its committee appointment process to avoid the future potential for any bias to creep into the reports of any of its panels or boards.

In commenting on the problem with the ill-fated Drug Research Board, one of the former DRB members candidly observed that we can hardly find true experts in any field who have no biases; but he suggested that what we must do is identify the experts' biases and then appoint the right mix of people to balance off the respective influences against each other. It would seem that the NAS-NRC would go far in restoring its bruised image if it could successfully follow that sage advice.

Edward G. Feldmann