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SCIENTIFIC INFORMATION IN FORMULATING PUBLIC POLICY

In the August issue of this journal, we published an editorial relating to the publicity and controversy surrounding the issuance of a report, entitled "Toward Healthful Diets," by the Food and Nutrition Board of the National Academy of Sciences-National Research Council. Although our editorial touched on the significant recommendations concerning human diet, health, and nutrition contained in the report, we directed our principal focus at the alleged bias and conflict-of-interest charges which were widely discussed in the public press.

We also expressed our sorrow at the damage this brouhaha was having on the public image of the prestigious sponsoring organization. In fact, the editorial was entitled "Maintaining NAS-NRC Credibility," because of our emphasis on this aspect and our gratuitous suggestions as to how the NAS-NRC might reorient its committee appointment process to minimize future reoccurrences.

The NAS President, Philip Handler, responded to our comments and we are pleased to publish his letter in the *Open Forum* section of this month's journal. His letter serves to bring out several points that were not included in our editorial—either (a) because of our inadvertent oversight, or (b) because those points were personally unknown to us. In the first category, Dr. Handler correctly points out that even those scientists who have disagreed with the report recommendations "have not found the Board's work or its assessment unsound or unscientific." In the second category, Dr. Handler explains that the problem of apparent bias "cropped up through news reports that stopped short of the full truth" by pointing out that some members were identified with one side of the issue but neglecting to point out that other members were equally identified with the other side of the issue. Hence, Dr. Handler tells us, the Board did, in fact, have the balanced "mix of people" that we urged in the conclusion of our editorial.

Referring to the technical dispute concerning the FNB report, President Handler poignantly states in his letter, "The scientific disagreement has turned not on the evidence but on what advice to offer the public at large under these shaky circumstances."

Whether, as scientists, we like it or not, and whether or not we feel that is how decision-making should operate, this last observation of Dr. Handler's reflects more and more how the system of public policy is functioning in today's world.

Indeed, in early October a symposium—and by sheer coincidence also sponsored by the NAS-NRC—was held on the subject of "The Role of Scientific Information in Decision-Making." The announcement publicizing the conference explained that 10 years ago words like benzene, DES, 2,4,5-T, and chlorofluorocarbons were found only in chemistry textbooks. But today they are seen in front-page stories in newspapers across the country. All of these terms became familiar for the same reason—the government has restricted the use of these substances based on scientific evidence of adverse effects.

The symposium further brought out that the pertinent scientific information is only a single dimension in a total process that involves many considerations including legal, economic, environmental, political, statistical, and various other factors.

We feel that it is important for all of us to recognize that such is the total process by which public policy decision-making is performed today. Indeed, this is how the process currently operates under the best of circumstances; often there is no scientific input at all and the decision may simply turn on one or two of these other factors, such as the political considerations.

At any rate, the day is now gone when public policy decisions are determined solely by scientific data and technical findings. Moreover, leaving our bias for science aside for the moment, this writer is inclined to conclude that this latter development is a good thing. For all its virtues, science provides too narrow a perspective, and the best decisions are going to be those that embody all considerations—including, but not limited to, the scientific aspects.

—EGF