

## 'Cholesterol Myth' stirs new controversy

The September 1989 *Atlantic Monthly* cover story, "The Cholesterol Myth," by Thomas J. Moore, has heated up the controversy over the nature of a link between high serum cholesterol levels and diet.

The article charges that the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute (NHLBI), together with the American Heart Association (AHA) and the American Medical Association (AMA), ignored the results of the most expensive research effort yet mounted that Moore said failed to substantiate long-held beliefs that cholesterol causes heart disease. Moore estimated that the cost of treatment and laboratory tests under the National Cholesterol Education Program (NCEP), the centerpiece of a campaign to treat more than 25 million Americans for high cholesterol, could reach \$10 to \$20 billion. "The money for this effort will be collected primarily for the benefit of drug companies," he said, "in a scheme engineered by a small group of men and women who mistakenly believed they were doing something good."

Moore also claims that the cholesterol-lowering drug lovastatin, or Mevacor, was rapidly approved by the Food and Drug Administration without determining its long-term side effects or whether it would prevent heart attacks. He cites evidence that the NHLBI launched a massive cholesterol testing campaign despite authoritative reports that laboratory accuracy is unacceptable and that individual cholesterol levels are unstable.

Critics and advocates of the program are speaking out in response to the article. Former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, at a round-table forum on risk communication at the National Academy of Sciences in September, said "I think the cholesterol bubble is about to burst." Asked if he thought institutions engaged in "selling risks," such as concerns about dietary fiber and cholesterol, had confused the public, Koop agreed, adding that he found insufficient justification for some government advocacy efforts such as the NCEP. Citing Moore's story, Koop said "Much in that article is true."

*Nutrition Week*, a publication of the Community Nutrition Institute, called the program "an expensive fraud." A recently published book by Frederick J. Stare, Robert Olson and Elizabeth Whelan, *Balanced Nutrition: Beyond the Cholesterol Scare*, also criticizes the NCEP. The authors charge that "nothing resembling a meaningful consensus has, as yet, developed on important issues related to serum cholesterol as a risk factor for heart disease—issues such as nationwide dietary guidelines and the 'borderline high' controversy."

The National Cholesterol Education Program Coordinating Committee criticized Moore's article for its "errors and distortions," and Scott Grundy, who represents the AHA and is chairman of the NCEP's science-based subcommittee, declared, "We can say with confidence that high blood cholesterol is one

important risk factor for heart disease and that lowering cholesterol will reduce the risk."

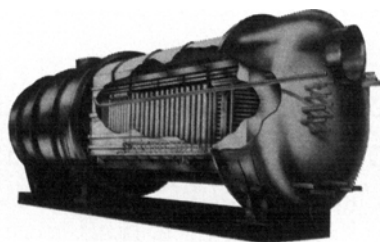
During a meeting in early October, the committee had been expected to give final approval to recommendations for a low-fat diet for all Americans older than 2 years of age, but postponed action on the report, citing editorial problems. "The decision had nothing to do with the *Atlantic Monthly* article," said Claude Lenfant, director of the NHLBI and NCEP coordinating committee chairman. "In fact, it was reached before the article was published."

At the meeting, Grundy reported that the science-based subcommittee had decided to review drafts of a rebuttal paper prepared for publication in a scientific journal. James M. McKenney of the American Pharmaceutical Association, who called the current debate "healthy and good," nonetheless expressed concern over reports that patients are telling health professionals—"This cholesterol business is nonsense; I don't need a diet or drugs." He added that "Our dietary recommendations are mainstream, common-sense nutrition. It's our opponents who are the radicals."

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## NCPA polls dietitians during ADA conference

In an informal survey conducted by the National Cottonseed Products Association at the American Dietetic Association meeting in San Francisco, 88% of the respondents said they consider cottonseed oil safe and healthful when consumed in a balanced diet. Other vegetable oils ranking highest in acceptance rates were soybean (90%), safflower (89%), sunflower (89%) and corn (86%).

About 57% of the responding dietitians considered essential fatty acids the most important contribution of fats and oils to the diet, while more than 25% said that taste, palatability and flavor are the most important contributions.

When asked which individual fats they felt should be avoided, the respondents felt most strongly about coconut oil, lard, beef fat, palm kernel oil, palm oil, butter and chicken fat. A total of 79% cited a high saturated fatty acid level in those fats as the most pressing reason for recommending a reduction in their consumption.

## California to regulate school lunch fat content

California has become the first state to require limits on the fat and cholesterol in food served to schoolchildren. The law, passed with little opposition, requires the State Department of Education to set guidelines for fat and cholesterol and to order the substitution of foods with lower levels where possible.

The USDA supplies surplus food to schools around the country, and much of it is high in fat or cholesterol: butter, whole milk, eggs and ground beef. But the department disputes the assertion that there is a scientific consensus on the safe level of fat in children's diets (*New York Times*, 9/25/89).

## Protein firm announces health, nutrition panel

Protein Technologies International, a wholly owned subsidiary of Ralston-Purina, is sponsoring a Health and Nutrition Board to evaluate advances in dietary soy protein and dietary soy fiber, and to orchestrate a nationwide educational program to communicate related health advantages.

The board, a panel of physicians, nutritionists and researchers, will meet twice a year to evaluate the documented nutritional aspects of soy protein and dietary soy fiber. Following this evaluation, the board will communicate its findings and recommendations to the medical community and food industry.

James Anderson, board member and professor of medicine and clinical nutrition at the University of Kentucky, said, "We . . . intend to call on the expertise of important organizations such as the American Dietetic Association and the American Heart Association in formulating our educational activities."

Other members include: George L. Blackburn, associate professor of surgery at the Harvard Medical School; Kenneth K. Carroll, professor of biochemistry at the University of Western Ontario; Stanley N. Gershoff, dean, School of Nutrition at Tufts University; Fred H. Steinke, Protein Technologies International; and Vernon R. Young, professor of nutritional biochemistry at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Questions for the board or requests for information about dietary soy protein and dietary soy fiber can be addressed to: Health and Nutrition Board, c/o Fred H. Steinke, Checkerboard Square, St. Louis, MO 63164.

## NRC diet report draws criticism

The National Research Council's "Diet and Health" report issued in March of this year was criticized by speakers at the Council for Responsible Nutrition's (CRN) annual conference in September. Some speakers called it a "recipe for risk."

The report advised Americans to "avoid taking dietary supplements, especially in excess of the Recommended Dietary Allowances in any one day." Patricia Hausman, a nutrition information analyst and a co-author of CRN's critique, charged that the NRC had presented its findings out of context, thereby misleading both the press and public.

"Taken together, the omissions, contradictions, and flawed analysis in the NRC report suggest a pervasive bias against supplements," Hausman said.

Despite the fact that "experts seem to choke" on admitting a beneficial role for nutritional supplements, current research strengthened the case for their use, according to Annette Dickinson, CRN's technical counselor. Dickinson said the scientific consensus on fish oils was moving toward recognition of the benefits of the supplements, as well as fish, in preventing heart disease. Whether FDA would recognize health messages relating to these benefits as being appropriate in labeling remains to be seen, she said.

## USDA wary of AHA's 'HeartGuide'

The Agriculture Department's Food Safety and Inspection Service recently told the American Heart

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Association (AHA) that it would not approve labels for meat and poultry products bearing the new HeartGuide logo (see the article on the HeartGuide in the November 1989 *JAOCS*), but indicated that a compromise might be possible.

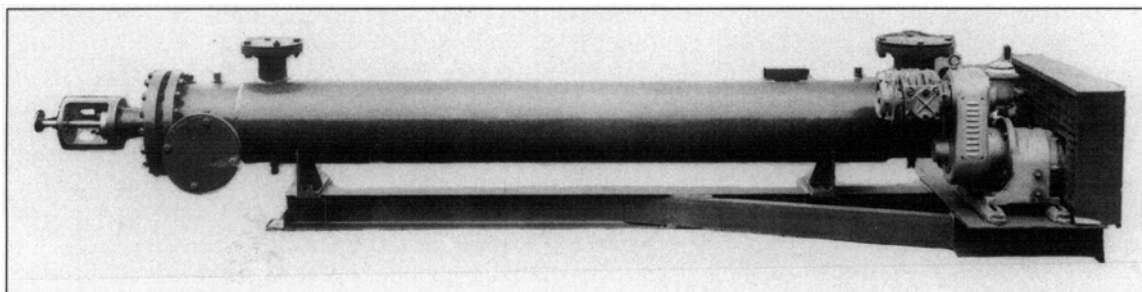
In a letter to AHA, USDA officials asked AHA to reconsider the HeartGuide program, saying that USDA officials agree with the intention of the program, but cited three serious concerns: the endorsement of individual "good" foods without a focus on the total diet; the absence of accompanying educational efforts and the "inadequate data" to support nutritional criteria; and the possibility that the AHA

program would be "detrimental to public confidence in the science of nutrition and the scientific community."

Frozen dinners and entrees are among the first food items targeted for the AHA HeartGuide endorsement. Because many of these products contain meat or poultry requiring USDA label approval, the USDA's position could deal the program a serious blow. A number of meetings between the AHA and USDA focused on a compromise in which the USDA may allow the logo on items meeting its standard for "dinners," while continuing to prohibit use on entrees and single items.

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