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How to Sustain Sound Dietary Guidelines for Americans
Mission Creep Within the Federal Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee
Threatens Americans' Health and Well-Being

Introduction

The fad diet. There's a reason why, in the U.S. at least, this term is widely understood. The media brings Americans a steady stream of findings about diet and health. One day, carbs are out and protein is in;

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not to eliminate the hazards of eating, but to reduce the risk factors associated with certain diets. (Sen. McGovern likened the committee's work to the Surgeon General's report on smoking, which he said didn't eliminate "the hazards of smoking" but allowed the industry to modify "its products to reduce risk factors."⁸) Sen. McGovern also focused on the simplicity⁹ of the goals and said he hoped they would reduce "confusion about what to eat and how our diet affects us."¹⁰

The mandate was clear: how could the federal government help Americans eat healthier so they could live longer.

DGAC's Mission Creep

Unfortunately, the DGAC is moving away from the focus of the original dietary guidelines. A look at the DGAC's deliberations reveals a movement among its members away from core concerns about Americans' nutrition and USDA's and HHS's mission to provide sound, scientifically-based advice for diet and health.

Historically, impact on human health defined the dietary guidelines' boundaries. The impact each recommendation would have on health, life expectancy and illness determined whether a topic belonged in the guidelines. Thus, the focus was on *what* people eat. The 2005 Dietary Guidelines added another concern: the risk of unsafe food. Because the question of how food was produced and cooked pertained specifically to food safety, the question – at this point – was still asked through the lens of human health.¹¹ (Food that becomes contaminated, either from production or handling processes, obviously could have a negative impact on health.)

The 2010 Dietary Guidelines, however, introduced, with a single reference, a novel concept for thinking about the links between diet and health: the issue of "sustainability." Specifically, those guidelines called for "safe, effective, and sustainable agriculture and aquaculture practices."¹²

Today, the 2015 DGAC shows signs that it wants to jump on that single reference and expand its mandate to look at a broader set of issues lumped under the heading of "sustainability." The current DGAC chair Barbara Millen has defined the committee's field of inquiry to include not just food and nutrition but also *anything* "health-related," and the DGAC has stretched its food safety subcommittee to also take on food sustainability.

To frame its deliberations about food sustainability, the DGAC invited expert Kate Clancy to present at its second meeting.¹³ Dr. Clancy defined "food security" as the ability of a country or

⁸ Jeffrey Mills, *The Associated Press*, January 14, 1977.

⁹ Marian Burros, "Recommending Drastic Diet Changes," *The Washington Post*, January 20, 1977.

¹⁰ Marian Burros, "Hill Report Asks Diet Changes," *The Washington Post*, January 15, 1977.

region to produce most of its staple crop, to maintain its natural resource base for farming and ranching, obtain a modest contribution from local food and urban agriculture and adapt to the potential for climate change.¹⁴ Food security, then, begins an agenda that no longer pertains solely to health.

The pattern of eating that best contributes to sustainability of land, air and water, as outlined by Dr. Clancy, includes:

- A plant-based diet;

- Reduced meat consumption, identifying beef as the meat posing greatest concern;

- Fish consumption, provided it comes with advice about which fish should be consumed;
- and

- Diverse diets, meant to maintain genetic diversity

This small stack of evidence is a very thin reed upon which to build a whole new dimension of federal dietary guidance.

Sustainability may be a niche interest for academics, but the evidence it provides now about its connection to diet and health is just not compelling.

The Unintended Consequences of Mission Creep

While sustainability is a hot topic among the DGAC, in most areas of the country where families are still trying to shake off the effects of the Great Recession and put nutritious – and affordable – food on the table, the discussion is nearly nonexistent.

If the federal government opts to develop new guidelines on very inconclusive evidence about sustainability, it risks providing nutrition information that is misguided and could do harm. Focusing on theoretical sustainability impacts also could put the guidelines out of reach for most Americans – and make the guidelines irrelevant to "the general public," the audience directed by statute. The rationale for the government to provide advice on diet rests on the ability of that advice to improve health outcomes. By tramping off into new fields and offering advice that is distant from the eating habits of most Americans the government risks undermining its ability to speak to most Americans.

Each consequence makes for a less healthy America. It would be a tragedy if what is still essentially an academic discussion comes at the expense of Americans making good choices that will improve their health.

As the report from the DGAC moves forward to those who must decide what authoritative advice the federal government should give the American people, policy officials will have to decide what guidance the general public will actually consider and, eventually, adopt. They must be mindful that they are writing to a public that is blessed with a longer life expectancy and lower mortality rates due to fewer nutrition-related diseases, but that is also struggling to afford groceries at their local discount mart and cannot fathom spending additional dollars at stores that put sustainability ahead of or on par with basic nutrition.

They must also consider what these new guidelines and regulations would mean for federal programs and their beneficiaries. How would they effect participants in the SNAP (food stamp) program? It's likely beneficiaries' dollars wouldn't stretch as far and their nutrition would suffer unless the federal government offered more generous benefits. And what about U.S. troops in the field?

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