

NAS Report on Diet, Nutrition and Cancer A Year Later

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One year ago tomorrow, the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) released the results of a study commissioned two years earlier by the National Cancer Institute (NCI). The NCI requested that NAS (1) review the state of knowledge and information pertinent to diet/nutrition and the incidence of cancer, (2) develop dietary recommendations for the public, and (3) develop recommendations for further research. The first report, titled *Diet, Nutrition and Cancer*, was released June 16, 1982, and addressed the first two topics and the latter is addressed in a *Diet, Nutrition and Cancer: Directions for Research* report released on June 9, 1983.

An earlier study by the NAS resulted in the publication *Toward Healthful Diets* in 1980. While the same agency issued both reports, significant differences exist. To understand the significance of these differences, it is helpful to know that the more recent committee included epidemiologists, while the first did not. The first committee relied on proof from controlled experiments for its recommendations; hence, its suggestions were limited by those results. The more recent review of the literature included broad-based correlations which did not necessarily show direct causal relationships between diet and cancer. Nevertheless, the review prompted the second committee to make less conservative recommendations based on the premise of doing no harm, and maybe some good. The news release issued by NAS became even more specific and, in doing so, provided unsupported and misleading information.

In this manner, a thorough scientific review of the literature was turned into a distorted press release which urged Americans to (1) reduce fat consumption; (2) eat very little salt-cured, salt-pickled and smoked foods, such as sausage, ham, bacon, bologna and hot dogs; and (3) eat fruits, vegetables and whole grain cereal products which contain compounds that may protect against cancer.

These recommendations, given as interim dietary guidelines, were followed immediately by the caveat that there are not enough data to specify what percentage of cancer risks can be attributed to diet or how much improved diets might lower these risks. You can be assured that this report had an impact on the meat industry and equally assured that the admitted uncertainty of the recommendations did little to soften that impact.

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This audience appreciates that there is no way of knowing the magnitude of the influence of the NAS report on the meat industry. This is particularly true during a period of national economic adjustment and declining livestock production. USDA production statistics show a decline in the per capita consumption of cured meats and cooked sausage. However, this cannot be explained by the NAS report any more than the coincidental increased consumption of dry sausage and some fresh meat products. We also know that, on a national basis, eating habits change slowly, whether the changes are favorable or unfavorable. Nonetheless, three major developments have occurred since last June. These are (1) the commissioned reviews of the NAS report, (2) the second wave of publicity, and (3) the increasing awareness and concern about fat in the diet.

The NAS report on *Diet, Nutrition and Cancer* spawned at least five major reviews of the recommendations. The Council for Agricultural Science and Technology (CAST) report reflected the diverse views within that organization, but generally did not support the recommendations. The American Meat Institute and the National Live Stock and Meat Board jointly sponsored an independent assessment by Epistat Associates, Inc. Epistat identified only 29 reports of analytic epidemiological studies or human clinical trials that were relevant to the NAS recommendations regarding fat and meat. Epistat concluded that "current data are insufficient to warrant such dietary changes and we suggest that efforts would be better directed towards obtaining more and better information on diet and health and not towards altering current dietary patterns."

Intra-agency reviews of the NAS report have been made by the USDA and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Those agencies' final reports are expected to be released concurrently in the next several weeks. Draft responses by USDA and HHS recognized the tenuous nature of the data, but called the NAS report a thoughtfully considered review of the current scientific literature. HHS generally agreed with the interim dietary guidelines and recommended implementation within the context of the 1980 USDA/HHS Dietary Guidelines. The USDA, however, took issue with several of the recommendations, criticizing the executive summary and news releases of the report as not emphasizing the uncertainty of the data. The news release was called "a straightforward case of distortion, particularly in its example of salt-cured or pickled and smoked foods to be avoided." The USDA report clarifies the differences between salt-cured and heavily smoked meat of some foreign countries, which NAS associated with cancer incidents, and the meats avail-

able in the USA. This difference was poorly understood or neglected by the NAS committee and a clarification by someone outside the meat industry should prove helpful. A fifth review by the General Accounting Office was prompted by the National Pork Producers Council through Congressman Grassley. The report, still in the formative stages, will not be available for several months.

While recognizing meat contributes less than one-third of the fat in the typical American diet, we believe that the NAS report has added significantly to the weight of evidence which recommends reduced fat consumption from all dietary sources. Prior to the NAS report, the emphasis on fat reduction and the debate about saturated and unsaturated fats centered largely on the cardiovascular implications of diet. As indicated earlier, the evidence is not conclusive, but the balance of studies appear to support the additional concern that excessive fat consumption or excessive calorie intake may be related to cancer. Both correlation and controlled laboratory studies have tied excess fat and/or caloric intake to incidence of colon and breast cancer.

Members of the American Meat Science Association are particularly attuned to the dramatic strides made in reducing the percentage of fat found on retail meat cuts. It is well established that increasing per capita consumption of fats stems not from animal fats, but from vegetable sources. Few critics of the meat industry consider this change in consumption patterns, which makes our challenge as educators and promoters even more critical.

In the same manner, it is important that we clearly define our meat terms. Most cancer-related research concerning meat diets has not discerned between the lean and fat

components. Consequently, meat protein seldom gets judged on its own merits. More often, it is considered an inseparable part of "meat" and a contributor to the effects of fat — be they good or bad. While we still must wait for further research on all aspects of diet and until the final verdict is in, we should take care that judgments discrediting fat are not loosely interpreted to mean meat protein.

A final factor which measures the impact of the NAS report on the meat industry is the "second wave" of publicity in the past few months. Typical of this publicity is a recent article in *American Health* magazine. Eight leading cancer researchers were asked what they had done to lower the risk of cancer. Six of the eight researchers, including Dr. De Vita, Director of the National Cancer Institute, said they had reduced or eliminated fat meat, beef or cured meats in their diet. The eating habits of eight Ph.D.'s will have little direct impact on meat consumption statistics but the trickle-down effect to the readers of *American Health* can be very significant.

Yes, there has been a negative impact of the NAS report, but it is one of several to which the industry has become accustomed. While it is necessary to correct blatant distortions of the scientific facts, in the long run industry will do better to create their own impact on the consumer by continuing to stress the positive nutritional message which is inherent in our products.

Like most of you, AMI believes that meat plays a central role in a healthy diet. While each person must assess his or her individual nutritional needs and act accordingly, meat will continue to play a vital role in the American diet.