New Dietary Guidelines: A Health and Nutrition Community Roundup

By Hank Campbell — January 10, 2016

The 2015-2020 Dietary Guidelines have officially been released\(^1\) and therefore so has commentary from around the nation.

Because it is the work of the federal 2015 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee, a government effort, it will invariably be political, right down to who is chosen to be on various panels and what studies they pick for their systematic reviews. And when politics enters the fray, people who like the ways it aligns with their pet beliefs will extol it, while those who have an agenda against a particular food type will be critical.

The American Council on Science and Health has been at the forefront of culturally and politically-agnostic nutrition thinking since 1978, so in the interest of being broad in scope we are providing this overview of what the overall food community thinks. We don’t agree with all of the opinions here, but as long as they are not simply crazy we have tried to include them. If we left any out that are saying something really different, please note them in the comments section below.

Why does it matter? Americans really obey these and these guidelines inform school lunch choices through 2020 -- like anything else, food habits acquired early are important, so there is a great deal of political maneuvering about that aspect of it. Organic food groups and their academic sympathizers want organic food, vegetarians want vegetables, the dairy industry wants dairy, and those engaged in the war on sugar believe if we remove soda that obesity would disappear, and therefore would want the government to be against those. There is a shred of truth to each claim, because there is no right answer that applies to everything in nutrition, so we are even including things that have been shown not to be validated, in the interests of transparency.

If you don’t want to read what everyone says, I can summate: the most controversial recommendation that looked likely to make it into the final version -- a cap on dietary cholesterol at 300 mg daily -- was removed because it was not supported by scientific evidence and comments conclusively showed that. It was the clearest example of some constituency on the panel putting
their beliefs ahead of fact, but getting overruled by experts outside the chosen panel.

Also removed were the rather arbitrary claims about meat from the previous revision. Arguments for less red meat were more environmental fundraiser evangelism than health -- "sustainability" and cherry-picked conclusions about plant-based meals. As we have seen with IARC claims about sausage being the same level of carcinogen as cigarette smoking, when activists get on committees they want to include studies that support them, but the public has become increasingly skeptical about claims that don't pass "the smell test." It's a relief that a government panel engaged in the same critical thinking the average American parent does.

Notable for those in the sugar business is that the panel recommended lowering sugar intake from 25-30 percent of total calories to 8-19 percent.

So here we go.

**Stop The War On Fun, But Eat Junk In Moderation and Exercise - American Council on Science and Health**

First up is Dr. Ruth Kava, Senior Nutrition Fellow at the American Council on Science and Health. In "New Dietary Guidelines: The Good, The Bad and The Meh", she is pleased that they did not cater to fad and pretend banning aspartame or other artificial sweeteners would be some sort of magical solution to obesity. Generally speaking, if Pepsi does something, it's a terrible idea, that is why their main soda can't even top Diet Coke in sales, so sugar in moderation will not harm you any more than Splenda will.

She is also pleased by the failure of woo merchants to claim nutritional guidelines should factor in "sustainability", which is a great catch-all buzz phrase but pointless in guidelines. There is nothing sustainable about organic food, for example, and a vegetarian diet, which is the secret goal of many food activists who invoke sustainability, is in defiance of nature, so that is certainly not sustainable.

**The Wellness Guru Approach To Nutrition - Washington Post**

Not everyone is as evidence-based as Kava. Academic food activist Marion Nestle does think soda is some sort of special invention of Lucifer and is like heroin. She and Washington Post writer Tamar Haspel invoke a conspiracy of "lobbyists, politicians and agenda-driven groups", which is a warning sign that evidence has left the building.

The irony of that: Organic food corporations have Nestle on their go-to list of reliable pundits who will promote almost anything if it is against conventional food. So, to $100 billion in corporate revenue, she is part of their conspiracy. She also does not like criticism and is very "you are with us or against us" in her War On Fun: She has tried to claim we must be on the take from Big Soda because we advocate moderate enjoyment of products like soda as part of an overall balanced diet.

Such lazy claims against anyone who disagrees with her capricious Moon Landing Hoax-ish posturing makes the public suspicious. Nonetheless, Haspel gives her a platform and they say they are "going rogue" to help the public and are "untainted by industry lobbying, unrestricted by
partisan politics” - I don’t know what that means to them, because while Nestle may claim anyone who disagrees with her is paid off by lobbyists and partisan, she remains on industry lobby and partisan politics outreach lists precisely because she is clearly willing to do both. And Haspel works for a corporation and has partisan politics just like everyone else.

What about their rogue list? It’s nothing radical at all, but some is a little silly. "Find the joy in food" is wellness guru stuff, odd to read when they insist they are scientific and being evidence-based. Thanks to the government for not going "rogue" and putting complete nonsense like that in their guidelines for school children lunch programs. Yet their article is not all bad, mostly because of what it lacks. Somehow, an editor or Haspel got Nestle to remove her usual recommendation that the public eat no GMOs and watch Dr. Oz. Kudos for that.

Get rid of these guidelines? - Real Clear Science

Dr. Ross Pomeroy at Real Clear Science has the boldest idea out there: He wonders if these guidelines have outlived their usefulness, especially if, as everyone on the pro-science and anti-science side seems to claim, they are overrun by lobbyists.

Pomeroy argues that the new guidelines are slightly more science-based but still ignore evidence that low-carbohydrate diets are just as healthy as "balanced" diets and still claim we need to limit sodium intake, contrary to recent evidence (not recent to the American Council on Science and Health - as with saturated fats, we noted the flaws in sodium correlation/causation claims decades ago) that it just isn’t an issue.

And what has happened since 1980, when Americans started taking these guidelines as science gospel and followed them? Obesity has skyrocketed. The reality is, despite the claims of people in the field, who are getting paid to say nutrition science is science, it just isn’t. As Pomeroy puts it, most in the field are engaged in "confirmation bias akin to religion." Play along, and you get to be a disciple of Marion Nestle. Deviate and she and others in power call you an apostate and your academic career is over.

Enjoy Eggs and Coffee Again - Los Angeles Times

Melissa Healy seems a little too excited about eating eggs with five cups of coffee every day but I assume she doesn't really mean that and is just engaging in the kind of Miracle Food article that is popular in mainstream press, because the rest of her article is essentially noting that the latest guidelines are catering to a recent fad: the Mediterranean diet. Like too much of nutrition science, that diet is just epidemiological correlation and causation: Population X seems healthier overall, let’s ask them to recall what they ate and then declare it a healthier diet.

She says that nutritional guidelines are designed to reduce obesity and Type 2 diabetes without noting that we've mostly been following these guidelines since 1980 while both of those things boomed. In previous guidelines, fat was supposedly the culprit, and the American public reduced fat consumption from 45% to 34% and obesity still went up. Too many calories of nuts and fish are still going to make people obese.
Sugar is no more of an obesity magic bullet than fat was, but because the panel relies on the latest evidence, still notoriously awful in nutrition papers, the hard cap will be here until at least 2020. Given their continued concern about salt despite a lack of evidence, sugar is probably going to be under the gun for decades longer than that.

**Meat Causes Cancer - NBC News**

The American Institute for Cancer Research (AICR) goes into full conspiracy mode, claiming Big Meat is preventing the panelists from advocating a vegetarian diet, but Maggie Fox at NBC News frames it nicer than that, saying "cancer experts" want less meat [9].

'Expert' is a bit of a moving target. The United Nations has many criteria for picking experts - gender and sexual diversity, geography, and, oh, you can never have consulted for any corporation. That limits their pool of experts a lot, so instead International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) and other quasi-official panels tend to be composed of academics who unfailingly have their own beliefs and get to vote on including their own papers and those of their friends in reviews, because basically everyone knowledgeable has been hired as a consultant.

So groups who think limiting meat is a magic bullet, the same way others do sugar or organic food, are going to focus on IARC papers because IARC can make a carcinogen out of anything, and they declared meat to be as hazardous as cigarettes and mustard gas [10].

It would be silly - it certainly taught the public to finally be skeptical of IARC and learn about p-values and meta-analyses - except regardless of the flaws, some groups will embrace their claim because it matches their ideology. And if their group name is impressive, like a group at the American Cancer Society, an NBC writer on deadline will give them a platform.

"As an organization dedicated to cancer prevention, we are dismayed to see that the Dietary Guidelines have allowed lobbying efforts to supersede the scientific evidence, when it comes to meat and cancer risk," goes the quote, but the evidence actually says the opposite.

The blowback was so strong that for the first time, IARC says they were wrong to use hazard and risk synonymously, and California, which loves to put warning labels on things under their Prop 65 state constitutional mandate, is looking for a way to undermine it for sausage. That does not get mentioned in the article.

**Super Foods Out, Super Diets In - US News and World Report**

Super foods are not really out - mainstream health journalism would have to close its doors without recurring Miracle Vegetable and Scare Journalism stories about nutrition - but at least the nutritional guidelines hype the individual food issue less. Sugar is not a magic bullet, nor is salt, meat or kale, which is breaking from tradition.

Instead, they adopted the super diet mentality, which is slightly less bad. Unless it's the Martini Diet, any diet will probably be good for you if it has fewer calories. Heck, a cleanse, though it is nonsense at its premise, works for weight loss because it is basically a crash diet. Joan Salge Blake rounds out this list with a moderate approach to the new guidelines, noting that eating patterns are going to be more of a concern [11] than whether or not you enjoy a soda, a steak or
Fritos on occasion.

She lists four diets that make the cut and you can try them if you like but there is no need to recount them here. If you consume fewer calories than you burn, 100 percent of diets are 100 percent guaranteed to succeed. Throw in some exercise and take your time and you won’t need the government or journalists (or us) to tell you how to live.

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