

The Academy Kills a Nutrition Report

Critics denounced a draft as "purely academic" and a threat to welfare programs; the authors would not compromise on a revised version

In a painful decision on 7 October, Frank Press, president of the National Academy of Sciences, killed a report on nutrition that had been 5 years in the making. The reason, Press said in a public letter to NIH director James Wyngarden, was that an "impasse" had developed between the authors of the report and its reviewers in the Academy. NIH paid for the study.

It was impossible to resolve the "scientific differences of opinion," Press wrote. He decided it would be best to start all over again, and he thereby avoided a messy public argument. The report, in final draft, now becomes a non-report.

A new committee will be created to write up the same subject: the recommended dietary allowances (or RDA's) for nutrients in the average diet. In the interim, Press endorsed the RDA's written in 1980 as still valid.

RDA's have been issued by the Academy at 5-year intervals ever since it took on the task of preparing them in 1941. The numbers produced in this exercise have turned into something more than recommendations, however. They are now incorporated wholesale into many federal, state, and private nutrition programs, thus determining food allotments.

Many nutritionists worried that lowering the RDA's (as was proposed in this case) would result in less or poorer food being offered in school lunches, by the food stamp system, and in institutions for the chronically ill. In particular, the report lowered the minimum requirements for vitamins C and A, which possibly could have led to less consumption of fruits and vegetables. At the same time, the report raised the calcium recommendation.

While the Academy downplays the political aspect of the dispute, the report's chief author, Henry Kamin, says policy was the most important element. Kamin, a biochemist at Duke University, chaired the nine-member Committee on Dietary Allowances* that received

the RDA assignment in 1980. In his view, the real scientific disagreements were "much narrower than the letter [to NIH] suggests." He thinks Press caved in to pressure from activists worried about the RDA's, people whom he calls "pop nutritionists."

Kamin says: "The issue is, shall scientific committees give the best advice they can, or that which pleases a current generation of policymakers?" The conclusion he draws from Press's letter is that "science should be a slave of policy."

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Kamin represents the old guard among nutrition experts. He was appointed to head the RDA committee by former Academy president Philip Handler and describes himself as Handler's first Ph.D. student and his "disciple." His personal bias was laid out clearly in a speech he gave on 23 May in Chapel Hill, N.C., in which, among other things, he spoke of the public's obsession with diet. He said: "Nutrition has become a fad as well as a legitimate discipline, and I sometimes think that the most important nutritional disease in America is nutritional hypochondria. Alleged 'health food' stores have proliferated, quackery runs high, and there is a too-broad assumption that nutrition can be a panacea, and that foods are either medicines or poisons."

Kamin knew his committee's report would be controversial, and he meant to upset some longstanding assumptions. As he said last May, "It had been 40 years since the first RDA's appeared, and the time may well have come for 'zero-base budgeting,' to reexamine original assumptions and calculations and try to rebuild RDA's from the ground up." Because of the intense preoccupation with nutrition, he added, "I expect to spend more time, after the publication of the RDA's, ducking rotten tomatoes rather than catching roses. So be it."

The tomatoes had already begun to fly by the time of this speech, the most

substantial one heaved in the form of a letter by D. Mark Hegsted, professor emeritus of nutrition at the Harvard Medical School. Dated 18 March, it was addressed to Kurt Isselbacher, chairman of the Academy's Food and Nutrition Board and chief of the gastrointestinal unit at Massachusetts General Hospital. Hegsted said that RDA's had become policy, whether the Academy liked it or not. Changes in them are unavoidably of concern to many outside the scientific community. For this reason, he judged the Kamin group to have "approached their task as a purely academic exercise and from a very limited perspective." In particular, he objected to Kamin's decision to define minimal nutrient requirements, rather than set broad standards for good health.

Hegsted's most telling comment also was a warning. Kamin's report would undercut an earlier Academy report, *Diet, Nutrition, and Cancer* (1982), which had recommended that Americans eat *more* food containing vitamins A and C. Hegsted invoked a fiasco of 1980 known as the *Toward Healthful Diets* paper, produced by the Academy's nutrition board. It minimized concerns about fat and cholesterol. In investigations that followed, it proved to have been written in part by a consultant to the egg industry. Hegsted pointed out that the public was bound to be confused, and the Academy embarrassed, by another food fight. "My expectation is that . . . we will probably see a repeat of the consequences after *Toward Healthful Diets* was published—congressional hearings, full discussion in the media, accusations that the Food and Nutrition Board is either incompetent or insensitive to important issues, etc." He made it clear that if this happened, he would not be able to defend the Academy's decision to publish.

Michael Lemov of the Food Research and Action Center, a Washington group, wrote a blistering letter on 13 August to the staffer in charge of assembling the Kamin report. Lemov was blunter than Hegsted. Lemov cited the "shocking" possibility that reducing the RDA's would mean "less food and more hunger for millions of people" in food programs. He also found it shocking that this could happen "when reports of hunger are widespread." He found it "astounding

*The members of the panel were Henry Kamin (chairman), James Olson of Iowa State University (vice chairman), Philip Farrell of the University of Wisconsin at Madison, Helen Guthrie of Pennsylvania State University, Victor Herbert of the Veterans Administration Medical Center in the Bronx, Robert Hodges of the University of California at Irvine, Max Horwitt of the St. Louis University School of Medicine, Orville Levander of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and Peter Pellet of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

that this could happen at a time when health care costs are already astronomical." He feared that the new RDA's would be used to "prove that less people are hungry in the United States." He found "almost unthinkable" the possibility that lower RDA's would bring about a lower official definition of poverty which the government uses to judge a person's eligibility for welfare.

The letter ended with an expression of hope that the "isolated thinking of a small group of scientists" would not bring about the results that were feared. "We hope that you can prevail upon all concerned," Lemov concluded, "to avoid the potential disaster that will occur—for the reputation of the Academy, for the public's understanding of the discipline of nutritional science, and for all lower income people in the United States—if the currently contemplated changes in the RDA's are implemented."

On 25 September the Academy held a special, by-invitation-only meeting on the future of the RDA's. Among those who spoke were representatives of the Food Action group and attorney James Turner, author of *The Chemical Feast*.

They urged the Academy to seek comments from a broader group of specialists, including nonscientists, in preparing the next set of RDA's. Apparently the advice was taken to heart. On 7 October, Press met with Wyngaarden to explain why the Kamin report would not be published.

In a telephone interview, Isselbacher said, "I can assure you that neither the Kamin committee nor the Academy was influenced by pressure groups." There were two substantive issues, he said. One was Kamin's action of redefining the RDA, calling it a minimal nutritive requirement and doing away with the old, fuzzy statement that it is meant to meet "known nutritional needs." Many reviewers preferred the older statement, believing Kamin's innovation offered a false sense of exactness. The second problem arose over the decision to lower several specific RDA's, such as those for vitamins A and C. To make changes in such cherished and well-established standards, Isselbacher said, one must have compelling new evidence that a change is justified. Alternatively, one must have a broad consensus that old

evidence needs to be reinterpreted. Kamin's group had neither. This made it very difficult to support the changes, particularly since many of the 15 reviewers disagreed. Also, it seemed important to "try to avoid giving conflicting signals" to the public, in Isselbacher's words.

Although Kamin's group was originally invited to take a radical and critical look at this subject in 1980, many of the reviewers, including members of the Academy's Food and Nutrition Board, were brought in later by Frank Press and feel no commitment to what may have been proposed in 1980. More than one critic said that, had the Kamin group given its findings without changing the quasi-regulatory element of the report (the RDA numbers), there might have been no quarrel. But since the RDA's do have a direct impact on public programs, it would be best to consult a wide variety of interested parties when radical changes are being proposed. "You may still arrive at the same conclusions," Isselbacher said, "but it helps to assure that all the opinions have been expressed."—ELIOT MARSHALL

Deficit Reduction Plan Threatens Research

Gramm-Rudman-Hollings amendment calls for wiping out the \$180-billion budget deficit in 5 years with a set schedule that hits many federal agencies

Relative to many other federal programs, science has fared well under the Reagan Administration. But it appears that federal support for basic and applied science in academia, industry, and government could be slashed in the next 5 years under the deficit reduction plan now before Congress. The impetus for such an upheaval is a budget-balancing amendment attached to legislation to raise the national debt ceiling to \$2.078 trillion.

Offered by Senators Phil Gramm (R-Tex.), Warren Rudman (R-N.H.), and Ernest F. Hollings (D-S.C.) on 3 October, the amendment sets out a plan for wiping out the current \$180-billion annual deficit by 1991. The proposal won easy passage in the Senate in a 75 to 24 vote. On 11 October, the House sent the measure to a House-Senate conference committee, where the proposal is expected to be modified and sent to the President late this month.

The directors of the federal science

agencies, who are now in the throes of fiscal year 1987 budget deliberations with the Administration, are taking a wait-and-see posture on the budget-balancing amendment. But National Science Foundation Director Erich Bloch and other program heads concede that

"We are only fooling ourselves, and worse, fooling the people, if we believe this proposal will bring order out of chaos. . . ."
—Senator Mark Hatfield

looming federal deficit problems are bound to trigger a shakeout in science, if not now, then in the near future.

"It has to happen anyway," says Bloch. "The [budget] pie certainly is not going to increase." The advent of a

budget reduction plan, adds Bloch, will require the science community to make hard decisions between basic and applied research. Likewise, some research programs that traditionally get funded may have to be dropped to accommodate new science efforts. "I am not convinced that everything we are doing across the federal spectrum is worth keeping," notes Bloch. "You can't carry everything forever."

The Gramm-Rudman-Hollings package has received strong support in the Congress, in part because of a growing concern about the cost of financing the national debt, which the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) estimates will hit \$1.85 trillion in 1987. The interest charges the government pays yearly on the national debt have risen to \$142 billion and will reach \$155 billion by 1988, CBO says. Even some House and Senate members, who think the legislation is poorly structured, supported it for political reasons. With elections 1 year