

Surgeon General Takes Aim at Saturated Fats

A massive report on nutrition and health has drawn fire for its lack of specific recommendations, but the fact that it has appeared at all is politically significant

THE FIRST *Surgeon General's Report on Nutrition and Health* singles out saturated fat—ubiquitous in the American diet—as the No. 1 dietary problem in the United States. Although the report provides common sense recommendations on how individuals can reduce their risk of various diseases and ailments, Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, in introducing the report, noted that it was prepared primarily for nutritional policy-makers.

Koop compares the report to the landmark report *Smoking and Health* issued by Surgeon General Luther Terry in 1964. That report, like the new one, made no specific policy recommendations and stopped far short of telling all smokers to quit. But it provided the scientific background for the numerous antismoking bills that followed. Koop says that the new report is based on far more data than was the 1964 report.

The American Heart Association is pleased, saying the report supports its findings on the link between diet and heart disease. The beef, dairy, and egg lobbies are equally pleased because their products are not vilified in the report.

But the vague policy recommendations and lack of firm dietary advice in the report have disappointed some critics. The report, for example, does not call for the requirement of fuller nutritional information on food labels, a move long favored by health and consumer groups.

The report urges food producers to use nutritional labels that clearly show the levels of fat, carbohydrate, cholesterol, protein, sodium, and vitamins and minerals in the product, but does not call for mandatory labeling. A number of bills requiring improved labeling are now before Congress.

The product of 4 years of work, the report summarizes some 2500 epidemiological studies as well as clinical trials and animal and biochemical studies. While the report contains no new findings, it is the most comprehensive federal report on nutrition ever.

In a news conference, deputy assistant secretary for health J. Michael McGinnis said the report does not give specific guidance on the ideal amount of fat or fiber in the diet because “the scientific base simply isn't there yet.”

(The American Heart Association has

long urged that fat make up no more than 30% of diet, and the National Cancer Institute and a Food and Drug Administration committee have encouraged Americans to double their daily intake of fiber to 30 grams.)

The lack of specificity is faulted by other critics. “It breaks not one square inch of new ground,” complains Michael F. Jacobson of the Center for Science in the Public Interest. “Scientifically, the report is ultracautious. It fails to recommend dietary changes without massive, and perhaps unobtainable, scientific evidence. Instead of recommending the best possible diet, it suggests only slight changes.”

Others defend the report. “What's important is that the Surgeon General made the statement and that it's a thorough one,” said C. Wayne Callaway, a Washington, D.C., nutritionist and editorial adviser to the report.

“The report couldn't say more clearly that to improve our health we need to reduce consumption of fats including saturated fats, and increase consumption of all the other goodies,” Callaway noted. The lack of precise dietary guidelines is “a phony issue,” he said. “Setting numerical values is a matter of judgment, not science,” he added.

McGinnis told the news conference that “five of the ten leading causes of death in the United States—coronary heart disease, certain types of cancer, stroke, diabetes mellitus, and atherosclerosis—are diseases in which diet plays a part.” Less fat and more fiber in the diet should reduce the risk of contracting many of those conditions, he said.

The report recommends that most people should:

- Reduce their intake of fat, especially saturated fat, by eating leaner meats and fish, and more whole grains, vegetables, fruits, and low-fat dairy products. Fat now makes up some 37% of the American diet, the study shows.

- Get sufficient exercise to burn off the calories they consume.

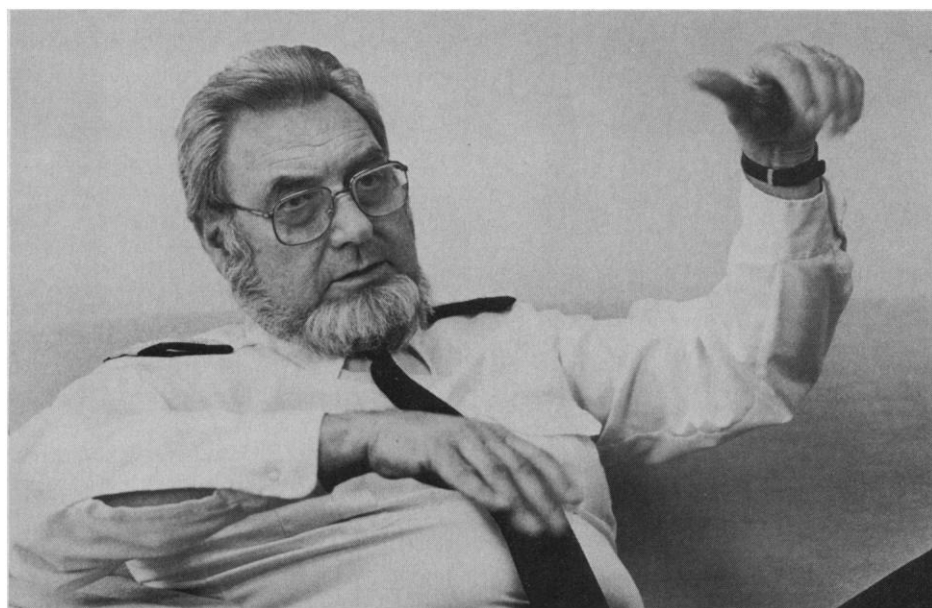
- Eat more whole grains and dried beans and peas to increase the amount of fiber in their diet.

- Limit their intake of sodium and sugar.

- Take no more than two alcoholic drinks per day; pregnant women should not drink at all.

Critics looking for more dietary guidance will have to wait for a brace of reports from the National Academy of Sciences, due by January 1989. One report will be aimed toward researchers, while a shorter one for the public is expected to include specific dietary recommendations.

■ GREGORY BYRNE



Surgeon General Koop compares report to the landmark 1964 study on smoking and health.

Richard Bloom