

USDA Admits "Mistake" in Doctoring Study

A 4-year-old battle between nutritionists and policy chiefs at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) came to an end last week with an admission from USDA that its political appointees violated the integrity of a major epidemiological study conducted by a team originally at Columbia University.

The study, released in a doctored form in 1986, examined the benefits of a program known as WIC—the Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, Children—which since 1972 has helped state agencies give food to impoverished women and children. It costs about \$2 billion a year. WIC's aim is to improve pregnant women's health and possibly to boost children's mental ability by giving them a good diet early in life. That hoped-for result is one of several that has never been carefully studied.

The WIC program, with 3.4 million enrollees, is remarkable for its ambition and scope. But, as revealed in a hearing on Capitol Hill last week, it is remarkable also for its lack of self-appraisal. USDA officials admitted before a joint session of the Select Committee on Hunger and the Senate Agriculture Committee that a previous USDA crew in the Reagan Administration butchered the only comprehensive study ever designed to find out if WIC works. The fiasco was the climax of a 5-year, \$6-million research effort, led astray by misguided managers, according to witnesses at the hearing.

Birge Watkins, USDA's new deputy assistant secretary for food and consumer services, conceded that two former USDA political appointees—Food and Nutrition chief John Bode and his special assistant Thomas Sullivan—stripped summary chapters off a peer-reviewed WIC study in 1986 and tacked on their own personal "compendium" of findings. This was a "mistake," Watkins said, and would not happen again. The original summary reported that, based on a detailed analysis of data, WIC seemed to be improving fetal health. However, the Bode-Sullivan "analysis" said the data were too ambiguous to support such a conclusion.

To David Rush, the M.D. nutritionist and epidemiologist now at Tufts who directed the study, USDA officials engaged in a "cynical" attempt to edit the findings. The most important conclusion, he says, may have been the historical finding that WIC reduced fetal mortality between 1972 and 1980.

USDA officials brushed this conclusion aside as "an overstatement" and superimposed their own views. Rush said he was never given a chance to comment on the allegation that he had overstated WIC's effects nor was he asked to review the Bode-Sullivan text before it was published. The expert advisory committee overseeing the WIC study also was denied a chance to comment on the "improved" text. Another witness, Robert Greenstein of the pro-WIC Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, said it was "absolutely unheard of" for a research agency to make unilateral changes like this and that the Bode-Sullivan revision was doubly suspect because it was written after the technical staff at USDA had approved Rush's version.

Rush protested, but was told he should accept the changes submissively. He was also told not to testify about his complaints to the Senate, but he did not follow these instructions. He

afterwards raised funds from private sources and, after 2 years' work, published the unexpurgated findings in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* (August 1988), a peer-reviewed journal. USDA eventually agreed to release the original study summaries as well.

"I have not seen as blatant an example [of tampering] as this in 20 years," said Keith Fulz, director of planning and reporting at the General Accounting Office, who had been asked by Congress to investigate the case. Fulz said that it was impossible to determine a motive for the USDA's actions, but the result was that "a reader of the compendium would have been misled" about the contents of the study. The revised text "did not fairly represent what the study team found," because it was loaded with technical flaws, according to Fulz. It "did not preserve the original research design." It "provided summary statistics that were not accurate." And it "incorrectly reported conflicts in the significance of outcomes reported by the National WIC Evaluation" (the Rush study). Finally, it "incorrectly reported the Evaluation's finding on health services." The mess that developed out of the disagreements between political leaders at USDA and the researchers, Fulz said, "could have been avoided" if the agency had made "full disclosure" of its disagreements early on, rather than surreptitiously rewriting the report's summary.

Watkins said the agency now aims to follow a policy of open debate and full disclosure. Officials have been told they should express disagreements with conclusions in a "cover letter," not by inserting their own words into the text of a study.

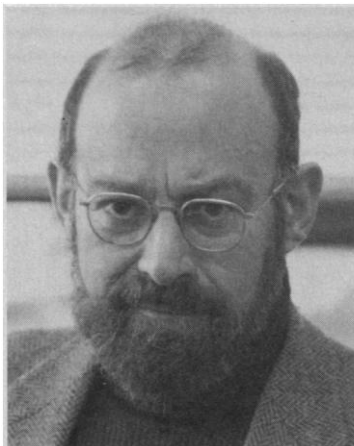
When Rush was asked whether he thought the error had now been corrected, he said not entirely. The underlying problem, Rush said, is that the research administrators at USDA are too isolated from critical peer review. He claimed that advisory panels "are only used as window dressing" and that the agency needs to seek out and use "competent technical advice."

Both Sullivan and Bode have left government service and neither could be reached for comment. Sullivan failed to respond to a phone message left at his home.

Although Fulz declined to speculate about motivation, Rush said it was clear to him that the former USDA executives wanted to "suppress" information on WIC's efficacy. Greenstein also pointed out that when Rush was finding benefits from WIC, the Administration had impounded WIC funds and was trying to persuade Congress not to restore them. The last thing the White House wanted was good news about WIC, Greenstein said.

As a postscript, Rush noted that the government has stalled so long now in deciding whether to conduct a follow-up investigation that it is too late to check some of the important issues raised by his study, for example, the possibility that WIC food supplements might increase the skull growth and mental development of poor children. There were indications of increased head size among children born to WIC mothers, he said, but those children are now past the age where meaningful data on early anemia could be collected.

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"Suppressed." Nutritionist David Rush won an admission from the Agriculture Department that it put a bogus summary on his report.