Food Board's Fat Report Hits Fire

Academy discovers Cassandra's problem: What good is the truth if it's not spreadable?

A palpable mood of martyrdom has descended over the marble porticos of the National Academy of Sciences.

The Academy has struck a blow against the food faddists who hold the public in thrall, but the public doesn't want to be freed from its superstitions.

The Academy has dared to utter an unpalatable truth, and has reaped the customary reward of those who challenge prevailing wisdom: abuse and obloquy, ad hominem attacks, ignorant sermons from the press, the yapping of offended special interests, and the cant of discountenanced politicians.

With a sort of proud defiance, Academy officials are almost reveling in the storm of criticism raised by "Toward Healthful Diets," a report released on 28 May which stated that there is no need for the average person to cut down on the amount of cholesterol in the diet.

Pondering the righteousness of its cause helps the Academy ignore the pain that comes from having shot itself in the foot.

The problem with the report lies not in its content—which has yet to be proved in error—but in its wrapping. The way in which the unpopular conclusion of the Academy's Food and Nutrition Board was presented to the public has engendered criticism of the Academy instead of debate about the issue.

The Academy, opined the *New York Times* in a 3 June editorial, "is supposed to be an authoritative, impartial source of scientific advice to both the public and Government—a Supreme Court of Science. But its latest report on healthful diets is so one-sided that it makes a dubious guide to national nutrition policies." The board's report, chimed in the Washington *Post*, "not only has increased public confusion over proper diet. It has also soiled the reputation both of the board and the academy for rendering careful scientific advice."

On 11 June the 20-member consumer liaison panel to the Food and Nutrition Board staged a noisy resignation en masse. The chorus of dissension reached an extraordinary fortissimo on 17 and 18 June in 2 days of hearings held before the House agriculture subcommittee on domestic marketing. Witness Henry Waxman, chairman of the House health subcommittee, shared his opinion that the Academy's views on the national diet were not only "inaccurate and potentially biased" but "quite dangerous" as well. Mark Hegsted, senior nutritionist of the Department of Agriculture, said he failed to see how the Food and Nutrition Board had reached its conclusions: "We feel that they essentially ignored the epidemiological evidence and are relying only upon clinical trials."

Hegsted, of course, had a position to defend because the Department of Agriculture along with the Department of Health and Human Services, the American Heart Association, the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and some 20 other groups, have all recommended that cholesterol intake be reduced. "I think, from everything we know, there is essentially a consensus of scientific opinion that would support our Dietary Guidelines," Hegsted claimed.

After Hegsted had painted the board into a corner, another witness stabbed it in the back. Hamish Munro of MIT, a member of the Academy, was until recently the chairman of the board's Committee on Dietary Allowances. In the ninth edition of the committee's *Recommended Dietary Allowances*, published this year, was included for the first time the advice that fat intake be restricted to 35 percent of total calories. Asked by subcommittee chairman Frank Richmond how the board had arrived at "totally contradictory conclusions to those of your own committee," Munro responded that it was difficult to understand: "It is, I think, unfortunate that the same Board has not been able to resolve this difficulty in its later publication—ours came out in February. . . . I think in this particular case there has been a slipup in the process of reconciling two reports."

If Munro's testimony raised questions about the internal workings of the Food and Nutrition Board, a subsequent witness portrayed the board as a palace of Byzantine intrigue and inefficiency. Sheldon Margen, professor of public health at the University of California, Berkeley, was a member of the board from 1975 to 1978. When he first joined, he told the House subcommittee, "I was greeted warmly but was never oriented as to my function or the essential function of the Board." Margen asked if he could see a copy of the board's charter or mandate. The Academy staff said they would search for one but apparently it was never discovered. Margen inquired as to the process whereby members of the board were chosen; he never managed to get an answer.

These were obviously the wrong questions: Margen discovered that, whereas he had joined the board as its vice-chairman, he soon no longer was. The post was abolished, being resurrected at the same time as Margen rotated off the board, he told the committee.

In Margen's view, the board's range of expertise is too narrow, its ties with industry too close to avoid the suspicions of bias, its mandate is too ill-defined, and its mode of operation is too secret. For all these reasons, the board and the Academy are being "bypassed" by government agencies on many issues, observed the board's ex-vice-chairman.

Margen's criticisms of the board could perhaps be attributed to his own unhappy experience with it, yet some of the same points were made by Donald Kennedy, president of Stanford University and former commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration. In a written statement to the House subcommittee, Kennedy observed that there were differences in procedure between the board's way of doing business and that of the scientific groups advising the Departments of Agriculture and of Health and Human Services. The latter included more scientists, who were able to work full time on the issue, and who were subject to stricter scrutiny for conflicts of interest. The difference in accountability to the public, Kennedy said, "may ordinarily be unimportant. When the matter is as controversial as the subject of this hearing, however, it may become critical. That is especially true when the more prudent advice offered to the public comes from the source with the better guarantee of objectivity."

Midway through its second day of hearings, the House subcommittee arrived at the culmination of its little morality play, the appearance of star witness Philip Handler, president of the National Academy of Sciences. Without too much doubt, the committee's intention was to crucify Handler, and they had set him up to play the role of Barabbas. But

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Handler was determined instead to play Galileo before the Inquisition. The Academy had spoken the truth, so what else mattered?—that was his position. "I remain convinced that appearances, and only appearances, have been offended in this instance," he declared in a written statement.

Handler did not understand the point that different committees, regardless of what they say, can come before the public with different guarantees of their objectivity. His first words to the House committee were an objection to Donald Kennedy's statement. "I do not understand Dr. Kennedy's point, and I take great umbrage with his raising the issue of conflict, which I think is an utter irrelevance and should not belong in these discussions," Handler said.

From under this cloud of umbrage, Handler did combat with inquisitor-in-chief Fred Richmond. Does it do you any good to prove you can out-argue the chairman of a House subcommittee? The president of the National Academy of Sciences evidently thought so. Richmond brought up the difference between the Food and Nutrition Board's advice on cholesterol and that tendered by the Departments of Agriculture and Health and Human Services: Why hadn't the Academy consulted with these agencies before issuing its report? Richmond asked. Handler turned the question into a freedom of speech issue, avowing that the Academy's first amendment rights had not been revoked.

Richmond persisted: "As an advisor to the United States government, your obligation was to go to USDA and HEW and put together a task force and work this out, so that the American poeple would not now be totally confused," he asserted. "It would be one rotten country if that were true: I deny that, sir," Handler responded. Richmond retreated in disarray, waiting until the close of the hearing to deliver a heavy homily about the Academy having overstepped its mandate.

In terms of the public reception accorded to it, the report of the Food and Nutrition Board cannot be acclaimed as an outstanding success. Was the disaster the inevitable cost of speaking the truth in a controversial arena, or could the Academy have taken steps to forestall at least some of the criticism?

The critics' claim that the Academy was confusing the public arose in part from the perception that the Food and Nutrition Board had entered the debate as merely another partisan, not as an umpire whose credentials put him above the battle. A more widely constituted group,

Jordanian Denies He Pirated Papers

Elias A. K. Alsabti, who has been accused by three separate groups of researchers of pirating a total of five scientific papers and whose whereabouts were unknown (*Science*, 27 June), has been located working in an internal medicine residency program at the University of Virginia. Owing to the publicity surrounding the charges of plagiarism, his patient care responsibilities have recently been suspended, pending a decision of a review board that will investigate the charges.

Alsabti carries a Jordanian passport, and for almost 3 years had worked in a variety of U.S. institutions, including the M. D. Anderson Hospital and Tumor Institute in Houston, Texas. When charges of plagiarism were made this past spring, reporters in the United States and England tried to locate Alsabti. The trail, however, ended at the American University of the Caribbean (AUC) in Montserrat, the British West Indies, where Alsabti graduated in May 1980 with an M.D. degree.

It turns out that Alsabti in April 1980 applied to the University of Virginia medical residency program in Roanoke. He was accepted, and began work on 16 June. According to Hugh Davis, director of the Veterans Administration Medical Center in Salem, Virginia—a hospital affiliated with the University of Virginia—Alsabti presented a diploma from AUC and papers showing he had passed the ECFMG, an examination administered to foreign medical graduates to see if they are qualified for practice in the United States (*Science*, 23 February 1979). Alsabti also presented letters of recommendation from South West Memorial Hospital in Houston, Texas, where he had most recently worked. Davis says neither the University of Virginia nor the VA hospital called any of Alsabti's former employers to verify his record. Although Davis now says Alsabti's admission to the residency program was otherwise in order, he also notes that "we probably should have made those calls."

The *Science* article, in which charges of plagiarism were reviewed, had been brought to the attention of administrators at the University of Virginia by associate dean Harold B. Haley, and administrators there and at the VA hospital had a conference with Alsabti on 27 June that ended with the suspension of his patient care privileges. According to Davis, a review board will be set up in the near future to investigate the charges of plagiarism and Alsabti's replies.

In a telephone interview on the same evening, Alsabti told this reporter that he had been fired from his job at the VA hospital that afternoon—fired unfairly. When mention was made of a paper by Daniel Wierda and Thomas L. Pazdernik [*European Journal of Cancer* **15**, 1013–1023 (1979)] that had appeared under Alsabti's name in another journal [*Japanese Journal of Medical Science and Biology* **32**, 53–65 (1979)], Alsabti interrupted. "I did not publish that paper," he said. "Somebody mailed it to the Japanese in my name." When asked why someone would want to do that, he replied: "I don't know. There are a lot of things involved."

Alsabti also alleged in the short interview that other researchers had in fact pirated his papers. He would not, however, speculate on how or why this occurred.

He also denied that he had told any researcher or administrator at a U.S. institution that he was a blood relation of the Jordanian royal family, as alleged in the *Science* article. Another point on which he said the *Science* article was incorrect was the color of his automobile. ". . . I have a white Cadillac, not a yellow one. The yellow one was sold."

In general, however, Alsabti would not discuss details of other allegations, specifically, the issue of plagiarism. He asserted that his reputation was ruined, and that the story was incorrect. "I just want to find a good lawyer," he told *Science*, "who will represent me, to sue the magazine, to sue all the people involved in this writing. And then I will show up in court to prove point by point, and then I will leave it up to the court to judge if I have plagiarized anybody's work or if somebody else is plagiarizing me."

—WILLIAM J. BROAD

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which clearly embraced all scientific parties to the cholesterol issue, would have carried more weight, but the authors of the board's report didn't even include an epidemiologist.

The Food and Nutrition Board has been repeatedly chided by consumer groups for its allegedly close ties to industry. It was only to be expected that the consumer advocates would resurrect the charge in order to discredit the cholesterol report, and the board made it as easy as possible for them. The report was wholly financed by industry—a USDA contract fell through after objections from the consumer movement—and the two scientists most prominently identified with the report turned out to have industry connections.

The board's controversial recommendations on cholesterol were issued not as a fully argued scientific report—that is to be published later—but as a mere 24-page abstract. The abstract did not fully explain why the board differed from the reasoning of other authorities, including that of its own Committee on Dietary Allowances. Academy officials contend that there is no contradiction between the two groups, but the chairman of the Committee on Dietary Allowances is one who believes otherwise.

The Academy's review system did not in this instance seem to have worked as well as it might have done. The Report Review Committee appoints special panels to vet reports that could give problems. It reviews more than 10 percent of the Academy's reports, but did not review "Toward Healthful Diets." Both the chairman and vice-chairman of the Report Review Committee read the report, but neither recommended it for review by their committee. Instead, it was assigned for a lower level of review.

Truth is one thing; credibility is another. The two are usually found together but not always. Cassandra was one instance of their separation. "Toward Healthful Diets" comes close to being another.—NICHOLAS WADE

Reprocessing Plans May Pose Weapons Threat

Political resistance and technical limitations will constrain nonproliferation safeguards at nuclear fuel reprocessing plants

The large-scale reprocessing of nuclear fuel being considered in several nations, including the United States, will place substantial pressure on the fledgling system of international safeguards against the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Experts say that safeguards technology is not evolving quickly enough to detect major diversion of weapons-grade plutonium from a commercial-sized reprocessing plant. They add that in any event a trickle diverted from such a plant may never be detectable.

Among all types of nuclear facilities, reprocessing plants pose perhaps the greatest challenge to the international safeguards system. About 150 tons of plutonium would be processed at such plants annually, but it requires only 8 kilograms or less to create a bomb. Illicit diversion is possible because such small amounts are frequently lost in reprocessing plant pipes, to be found only when the plants are inventoried at long intervals, or simply to be chalked up as routine loss beyond the operator's control. Routine, acceptable losses often run as high as 5 to 10 percent of the total plant output. Once the necessary amount of plutonium has been gathered, a weapon can be made in as little as 7 to 20 days; thus a diversion must be almost immediately detected and exposed—a capability not now available.

Britain's reprocessing plant at Windscale, shown here, is being renovated to accommodate more spent reactor fuel from domestic and international customers.

These risks are important in view of a new policy under consideration by the Carter Administration (*Science*, 6 June). Were the policy to be adopted, the United States would grant blanket authority for the reprocessing of nuclear fuel for use in breeder reactor programs between now and 1990. The present U.S. policy is to discourage both breeders and reprocessing by exercising control over much of the world's fuel supply. With blanket U.S. approval, existing plants in France, England, and Japan might reprocess larger quantitites of spent nuclear fuel, and other countries such as Italy, Belgium, Sweden, West Germany, Taiwan, and even the United States, might be encouraged to start constructing new plants (*Science*, 20 June). The new Administration policy would also facilitate designation of international plutonium storage sites, where reprocessing might occur under as yet unspecified conditions. With more reprocessing under

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