The Surgeon General's Report on NUTRITION AND HEALTH 1988
MESSAGE FROM THE SURGEON GENERAL

I am pleased to transmit to the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services this first Surgeon General's Report on Nutrition and Health. It was prepared under the auspices of the Department's Nutrition Policy Board, and its main conclusion is that overconsumption of certain dietary components is now a major concern for Americans. While many food factors are involved, chief among them is the disproportionate consumption of foods high in fats, often at the expense of foods high in complex carbohydrates and fiber--such as vegetables, fruits, and whole grain products--that may be more conducive to health.

I offer this Report in the context of the obligation of the Surgeon General to inform the American public of developments in the science base that have widespread implications for human health. Perhaps the classic example of such reports is the one issued in 1964 during the tenure of one of my predecessors, Dr. Luther Terry, which summarized the epidemiologic evidence available at the time on the relationship of tobacco to health. This report called attention to the inescapable conclusion that cigarettes were a major source of illness and death for those who smoked--at that time a majority of adult men.

This Surgeon General's Report on Nutrition and Health follows the tradition of the original report on smoking and health. It addresses an area of some controversy and substantial misunderstanding. And the relative magnitude of the associated health concerns is comparable, with dietary factors playing a prominent role in five of the ten leading causes of death for Americans. In addition, the depth of the science base underlying its findings is even more impressive than that for tobacco and health in 1964, with animal and clinical evidence adding to the epidemiologic studies.

On the other hand there are some fundamental differences. Most obvious is the fact that food is necessary for good health. Foods contain nutrients essential for normal metabolic function, and when problems arise, they result from imbalance in nutrient intake or from harmful interaction with other factors. Moreover, we know today much more about individual variation in response to nutrients than we know about possible variations in
response to tobacco. Some people are clearly more susceptible than others to problems from diets that are, for example, higher in fat or salt.

Also, unlike the experience for tobacco in 1964, people are already making dietary changes, as witnessed by the shift to products lower in saturated fats. Nonetheless, the important effects of the dietary factors underlying problems like coronary heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke, some types of cancer, diabetes, obesity--problems that represent the leading health threats for Americans--indicate the potential for substantial gains to be accrued by the recommendations contained in this Report.

It is important to emphasize that the focus of this Report is primarily on the relationship of diet to the occurrence of chronic diseases. The Report is not intended to address the problems of hunger or undernutrition that may occur in the United States among certain subgroups of the population. All Americans should have access to an appropriate diet, but they do not. And even though the size and numbers of problems related to inadequate access to food are proportionately much smaller than those related to dietary excesses and imbalances, the problems of access to food are of considerable concern to me, personally, wherever they may occur.

The apparently sizable numbers of people resorting to the use of soup kitchens and related food facilities, as well as the possible role of poor diet as a contributor to the higher infant mortality rates associated with inadequate income, suggest the need for better monitoring of the nature and extent of the problem and for sustained efforts to correct the underlying causes of diminished health due to inadequate or inappropriate diets.

This report was prepared primarily for nutritional policy makers, although the eventual beneficiaries of better nutritional policy will be the American people. I am convinced that with a concerted effort on the part of policy makers throughout the Nation, and eventually by the public, our daily diets can bring a substantial measure of better health to all Americans. I commend to them the recommendations of this Report.

C. Everett Koop, M.D., Sc.D.
Surgeon General
U.S. Public Health Service
Foreword

This first Surgeon General’s Report on Nutrition and Health marks a key event in the history of public health in the United States. While the Report has been developed for use by policymakers, it offers lessons that can be directly applied to the public. It responds to the increasing interest of scientists, health professionals, and the American people in the role of diet in health promotion. Within recent years, concerns about nutrition and health have expanded beyond the need to prevent deficiencies to encompass the effects of typical American dietary patterns on the incidence of chronic diseases that are leading causes of death and disability in this country. Although scientific research has provided substantial insight into the ways specific dietary factors influence specific diseases, there are still many uncertainties about diet-disease relationships. The Department of Health and Human Services, through the Public Health Service and the Surgeon General, welcomes the responsibility to evaluate the current state of knowledge and to advise the public accordingly.

This Report reviews the scientific evidence that relates dietary excesses and imbalances to chronic diseases. On the basis of the evidence, it recommends dietary changes that can improve the health prospects of many Americans. Of highest priority among these changes is to reduce intake of foods high in fats and to increase intake of foods high in complex carbohydrates and fiber.

The evidence presented here indicates the convergence of similar dietary recommendations that apply to prevention of multiple chronic diseases. The recommendation to reduce dietary fat, for example, aims to reduce the risk for coronary heart disease, diabetes, obesity, and some types of cancer. This advice is not new. But it is now substantiated by a large body of evidence derived from many different kinds of research—a research base that is now even more comprehensive than was the case for the pioneering 1964 Surgeon General’s Report on Smoking and Health.

The weight of this evidence and the magnitude of the problems at hand indicate that it is now time to take action. In the cause of good health for all our citizens, I urge support for this Report’s recommendations by every sector of American society.

Otis R. Bowen, M.D.
Secretary
Preface

The Public Health Service of the Department of Health and Human Services has long maintained an interest in the relationship between food and health. In the 1970's, this interest began to focus on the ways in which dietary excesses and imbalances increase the risk for chronic diseases. With the publication in 1979 of Healthy People: The Surgeon General's Report on Health Promotion and Disease Prevention, attention turned toward environmental and behavioral changes that Americans might make to reduce their risks for morbidity and mortality. Nutrition was one such priority area. The 1980 report Promoting Health/Preventing Disease: Objectives for the Nation included 17 specific, quantifiable objectives in nutrition designed to reduce risks and to prevent illness and death. Also in 1980, the Department published, jointly with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the first edition of Dietary Guidelines for Americans. This report, revised in 1985, includes seven recommendations that, taken together, address the relationship between diet and chronic diseases.

Diseases such as coronary heart disease, stroke, cancer, and diabetes remain leading causes of death and disability in the United States. Substantial scientific research over the past few decades indicates that diet can play an important role in prevention of such conditions. The Public Health Service has now reviewed this research and has produced a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between dietary factors and chronic disease risk. This Surgeon General's Report on Nutrition and Health summarizes research on the role of diet in health promotion and disease prevention. Its findings indicate the great importance of diet to health. They demonstrate that changes in present dietary practices of Americans could produce substantial gains in the health of the population. The Public Health Service is committed to improving the health of Americans through its programs in education, services, and research.

One mechanism for improving the health of Americans is through the 1990 Health Objectives for the Nation. The role of nutrition in health will continue to be a focus of national health priorities as we develop new objectives for the year 2000. Federal, State, and local governments, the American public, the food industry, and scientists and health professionals can work together to encourage Americans to make healthy food choices and to achieve national health goals.
I am pleased to commend to the American people this review of the scientific evidence that links diet to chronic disease, and I urge that the findings of this important Report be given your careful consideration.

Robert F. Windom, M.D.
Assistant Secretary for Health
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Nutrition Policy Board
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

J. Michael McGinnis, M.D. (Chairman), Deputy Assistant Secretary for Health (Disease Prevention and Health Promotion), Public Health Service


W. Douglas Badger, M.Div., Deputy Assistant Secretary, Office of Human Development Services

Mary M. Evert, M.B.A., Director, Office of Community Services, Family Support Administration

Manning Feinleib, M.D., M.P.H., Dr.P.H., Director, National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control, Public Health Service

Allan L. Forbes, M.D., Director, Office of Nutrition and Food Sciences, Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, Food and Drug Administration, Public Health Service

William T. Friedewald, M.D., Associate Director for Disease Prevention, National Institutes of Health, Public Health Service

Bernard I. Grosser, M.D., Director, Office of Science, Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Administration, Public Health Service

John Porvaznik, M.D., F.A.C.S., Associate Director, Office of Health Programs, Indian Health Service, Public Health Service

William A. Robinson, M.D., M.P.H., Chief Medical Officer, Health Resources and Services Administration, Public Health Service
Acknowledgments

The Surgeon General's Report on Nutrition and Health was prepared under the general editorship of the Department of Health and Human Services' Nutrition Policy Board, whose members are listed on the previous page. Managing Editor was Marion Nestle, Ph.D., M.P.H., Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. Special editorial assistance was contributed by John Bailar III, M.D., Ph.D., Science Advisor, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, and by Darla E. Danford, M.P.H., D.Sc., R.D., National Institutes of Health. Project Officer during early stages of preparation of the Report was Ann Sorenson, Ph.D., now with the National Institutes of Health.

In addition to the guidance of the Nutrition Policy Board’s Senior Editorial Advisors and Staff Working Group, important editorial contributions were made by Karen Donato, M.S., R.D., Nancy D. Ernst, M.S., R.D., Marilyn E. Farrand, M.S., R.D., and Van S. Hubbard, M.D., Ph.D., of the National Institutes of Health’s Nutrition Education Subcommittee; and by Walter H. Glinsmann, M.D., Marilyn G. Stephenson, M.S., R.D., John E. Vanderveen, Ph.D., and Elizabeth Yetley, Ph.D., R.D., of the Food and Drug Administration’s Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition.

Senior Editorial Advisors to the Nutrition Policy Board were:

C. Wayne Callaway, M.D., Director, Center for Clinical Nutrition, George Washington University Medical Center, Washington, D.C.

Johanna T. Dwyer, D.Sc., Director, Frances Stern Nutrition Center, New England Medical Center Hospitals, and Professor of Medicine, Tufts University Medical School. Boston, Massachusetts

Samuel Fomon, M.D., Professor of Pediatrics, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa

Richard L. Hall, Ph.D., Vice President, Science and Technology, McCormick & Co., Inc., Hunt Valley, Maryland

Robert I. Levy, M.D., President, Sandoz Research Institute, East Hanover, New Jersey

Walter Mertz, M.D., Director, Beltsville Human Nutrition Research Center, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Beltsville, Maryland
Malden C. Nesheim, Ph.D., Vice President for Planning and Budget, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York

Sushma Palmer, D.Sc., Executive Director, Food and Nutrition Board, National Academy of Sciences, Washington, D.C.

Irwin H. Rosenberg, M.D., Director, USDA Human Nutrition Research Center on Aging, Tufts University, Boston, Massachusetts

Theodore Van Itallie, M.D., Professor of Medicine, Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons, New York, New York

**Nutrition Policy Board Staff Working Group members were:**

Elizabeth Brannon, M.S., R.D., Clinical Nutrition Specialist, Bureau of Maternal and Child Health and Resources Development, Health Resources and Services Administration, Rockville, Maryland

Darla E. Danford, M.P.H., D.Sc., R.D., Nutritionist, Nutrition Coordinating Committee, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland

Willie M. Etheridge, M.S., Policy Analyst, Policy Planning and Legislation Division, Office of Human Development Services, Washington, D.C.

James J. Hearn, L.L.B., Chief, Community Food and Nutrition Program, Office of Community Services, Family Support Administration, Washington, D.C.

M. Yvonne Jackson, Ph.D., R.D., Chief, Nutrition and Dietetics Section, Indian Health Service, Rockville, Maryland

Linda D. Meyers, Ph.D., Nutrition Advisor, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Washington, D.C.

Marion Nestle, Ph.D., M.P.H., Director, Nutrition Policy Staff, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Washington, D.C.

Lana Skirboll, Ph.D., Special Assistant to the Director, Office of Science, Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Administration, Rockville, Maryland

Frederick Trowbridge, M.D., M.S., Director, Nutrition Division, Center for Health Promotion and Education, Centers for Disease Control, Atlanta, Georgia
Catherine E. Woteki, Ph.D., R.D., Deputy Director, Division of Health Examination Statistics, National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control, Hyattsville, Maryland

**Individuals who contributed to the writing of draft chapters or portions of the Report were:**

Margaret J. Albrink, M.D., M.P.H., Professor of Medicine, West Virginia University Medical Center, Morgantown, West Virginia (Obesity)

William R. Beisel, M.D., Adjunct Professor, Department of Immunology and Infectious Diseases, School of Hygiene and Public Health, The Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland (Infections and Immunity)

C. Wayne Callaway, M.D., Director, Center for Clinical Nutrition, George Washington University Medical Center, Washington, D.C. (Alcohol)

Joseph E. Ciardi, Ph.D., Research Biochemist, Caries and Restoration Materials Research Branch, Extramural Program, National Institute of Dental Research, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland (Dental Diseases)

Phyllis A. Crapo, R.D., Department of Medicine, University of California at San Diego, LaJolla, California (Diabetes)

Jeffrey A. Cutler, M.D., Chief, Prevention and Demonstration Research Branch, National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland (High Blood Pressure)

Peter R. Dallman, M.D., Professor, Department of Pediatrics, University of California, San Francisco, California (Anemia)

Barbara H. Dennis, R.D., Ph.D., Division of Heart and Vascular Diseases, National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland (Coronary Heart Disease)

John Duguid, M.D., Ph.D., Neurologist, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts (Neurologic Disorders)

Robert Edelman, M.D., Chief, Clinical and Epidemiological Studies Branch, Deputy Director, Microbiology and Infectious Diseases Program, National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland (Infections and Immunity)
Nancy D. Ernst, M.S., R.D., Nutrition Coordinator, National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland (High Blood Pressure)

Lloyd J. Filer, Jr., M.D., Ph.D., Department of Pediatrics, University of Iowa School of Medicine, Iowa City, Iowa (Maternal and Child Nutrition)

Mattie R.S. Fox, Ph.D., Chief, Nutrient Interaction Section, Experimental Nutrition Branch, Division of Nutrition, Food and Drug Administration, Washington, D.C. (Introduction and Background)

Philip J. Garry, Ph.D., Professor, Department of Pathology, University of New Mexico School of Medicine, Albuquerque, New Mexico (Aging)

James Goodwin, M.D., Professor and Vice Chairman, Department of Medicine, Medical College of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, Wisconsin (Aging)

Sheila Gottschalk, M.D., Associate Professor of Pediatrics, Louisiana State University School of Medicine, New Orleans, Louisiana (Maternal and Child Nutrition)

Gregory E. Gray, M.D., Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Department of Psychiatry and the Behavioral Sciences, Los Angeles County-University of Southern California Medical Center, Los Angeles, California (Behavior)

Peter Greenwald, M.D., Dr.P.H., Director, Division of Cancer Prevention and Control, National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland (Cancer)

John H. Growdon, M.D., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Massachusetts General Hospital, and Harvard Medical School, Cambridge, Massachusetts (Neurologic Disorders)

Margaret A. Hamburg, M.D., Special Assistant to the Director, National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland (Infections and Immunity)

James P. Harwood, Ph.D., Executive Secretary, Scientific Review Office, National Institute on Aging, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland (Introduction and Background)

Michael Horan, M.D., Chief, Hypertension and Kidney Diseases Branch, National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland (High Blood Pressure)

Richard D. Hurt, M.D., Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minnesota (Alcohol)
Howard Jacobson, M.D., Institute of Nutrition, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina (Maternal and Child Nutrition)

Mamie Y. Jenkins, Ph.D., Research Chemist, Bioavailability Section, Experimental Nutrition Branch, Division of Nutrition, Food and Drug Administration, Washington, D.C. (Introduction and Background)

Alexander Jordan, Ph.D., Supervisory Pharmacologist, Food and Drug Administration, Rockville, Maryland (Drug-Nutrient Interactions)

George M. Kazzi, M.D., Chief, Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Harper-Grace Hospitals, and Assistant Professor, Maternal-Fetal Medicine, Wayne State University School of Medicine, Detroit, Michigan (Maternal and Child Nutrition)

Joel D. Kopple, M.D., Professor of Medicine and Public Health, University of California at Los Angeles, Chief, Division of Nephrology and Hypertension, Harbor-UCLA Medical Center, Torrance, California (Kidney Diseases)

Markus J.P. Kruesi, M.D., Staff Psychiatrist, National Institute of Mental Health, Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Administration, Rockville, Maryland (Behavior)

Elaine Lanza, Ph.D., Diet and Cancer Branch, Division of Cancer Prevention and Control, National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland (Cancer)

Harris R. Lieberman, Ph.D., Department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts (Neurologic Disorders; Behavior)

Gardner C. McMillan, M.D., Division of Heart and Vascular Diseases, National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland (Coronary Heart Disease)

Albert I. Mendeloff, M.D., M.P.H., Department of Medicine, The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Baltimore, Maryland (Gastrointestinal Diseases)

Linda D. Meyers, Ph.D., Nutrition Advisor, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Washington, D.C. (Introduction and Background)

Sanford A. Miller, Ph.D., Director, Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, Food and Drug Administration, Washington, D.C. (Introduction and Background)
Geraldine V. Mitchell, Ph.D., Chief, Bioavailability Section, Experimental Nutrition Branch, Division of Nutrition, Food and Drug Administration, Washington, D.C. (Introduction and Background)

Eliot N. Mostow, M.D., M.P.H., Medical Staff Fellow, Division of Cancer Prevention and Control, National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland (Cancer)

Jerrold M. Olefsky, M.D., Department of Medicine, University of California at San Diego, and San Diego Veterans Administration Medical Center, San Diego, California (Diabetes)

Youngmee K. Park, Ph.D., Nutritionist, Clinical Nutrition Branch, Division of Nutrition, Food and Drug Administration, Washington, D.C. (Introduction and Background)

Jean A.T. Pennington, Ph.D., Assistant to the Director, Division of Nutrition, Food and Drug Administration, Washington, D.C. (Introduction and Background)

L. Ross Pierce, M.D., Group Leader, Food and Drug Administration, Rockville, Maryland (Drug-Nutrient Interactions)

Peggy L. Pipes, M.P.N., R.D., Child Development Mental Retardation Center, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington (Maternal and Child Nutrition)

Ernest0 Pollitt, Ph.D., Department of Applied Behavioral Sciences, University of California, Davis, California (Maternal and Child Nutrition)

Leon Prosky, Ph.D., Deputy Chief, Experimental Nutrition Branch, Division of Nutrition, Food and Drug Administration, Washington, D.C. (Introduction and Background)

Jeanne I. Rader, Ph.D., Chief, Nutrient Toxicity Section, Experimental Nutrition Branch, Division of Nutrition, Food and Drug Administration, Washington, D.C. (Introduction and Background)

Lawrence G. Raisz, M.D., Professor of Medicine and Chief, Division of Endocrinology and Metabolism, University of Connecticut School of Medicine, Farmington, Connecticut (Skeletal Diseases)

Judith L. Rapoport, M.D., Chief, Child Psychiatry Branch, National Institute of Mental Health, Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Administration, Rockville, Maryland (Behavior)
Merrill S. Read, Ph.D., Professor and Chairman, Human Nutrition and Food Systems, College of Human Ecology, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland (Maternal and Child Nutrition)

Basil M. Rifkind, M.D., F.R.C.P., Division of Heart and Vascular Diseases, National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland (Coronary Heart Disease)

Norman E. Rosenthal, M.D., Chief, Unit on Outpatient Studies, Clinical Psychology Branch, National Institute of Mental Health, Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Administration, Rockville, Maryland (Behavior)

Neil L. Sass, Ph.D., Senior Scientist, Office of Management, Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, Food and Drug Administration, Washington, D.C. (Introduction and Background)

Claudia Schuth, M.D., Associate Professor of Pediatrics, Louisiana State University School of Medicine, New Orleans, Louisiana (Maternal and Child Nutrition)

James H. Shaw, Ph.D., Professor of Nutrition Emeritus, Harvard School of Dental Medicine, Boston, Massachusetts (Dental Diseases)

Alan J. Sheppard, Ph.D., Chief, Experimental Methods Research Section, Nutrient Surveillance Branch, Division of Nutrition, Food and Drug Administration, Washington, D.C. (Introduction and Background)

Solomon Sobel, M.D., Food and Drug Administration, Rockville, Maryland (Drug-Nutrient Interactions)

Robert J. Sokol, M.D., Professor and Chairman and Chief, Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Wayne State University, Hutzel Hospital, Detroit, Michigan (Maternal and Child Nutrition)

Marilyn G. Stephenson, M.S., R.D., Assistant to the Director, Office of Nutrition and Food Sciences, Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, Food and Drug Administration, Washington, D.C. (Dietary Fads and Frauds)

Albert Stunkard, M.D., Professor of Psychiatry, University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (Behavior)

Robert M. Suskind, M.D., Department of Pediatrics, Louisiana State University School of Medicine, New Orleans, Louisiana (Maternal and Child Nutrition)
Shyy Hwa Tao, Ph.D., Research Chemist, Nutrient Interaction Section, Experimental Nutrition Branch, Division of Nutrition, Food and Drug Administration, Washington, D.C. (Introduction and Background)

Thomas Thom, Statistician, Epidemiology and Biometry Research Program, Division of Epidemiology and Clinical Applications, National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland (Coronary Heart Disease)

Gloria Troendle, M.D., Deputy Director, Food and Drug Administration, Rockville, Maryland (Drug-Nutrient Interactions)

Montaz Wassef, Ph.D., Division of Heart and Vascular Diseases, National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland (Coronary Heart Disease)

Cora E. Weeks, J.D., Ph.D., Consumer Safety Officer, Division of Regulatory Guidance, Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, Food and Drug Administration, Washington, D.C. (Introduction and Background)

Robert W. Wissler, M.D., Ph.D., Donald N. Pritzker Distinguished Service Professor of Pathology Emeritus, University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois (Coronary Heart Disease)

Philip A. Wolf, M.D., Professor of Neurology and Associate Research Professor of Medicine, Preventive Medicine and Epidemiology, Boston University School of Medicine, Boston, Massachusetts (Neurologic Disorders)

Bonnie S. Worthington-Roberts, Ph.D., Professor, Nutritional Sciences, University of Washington, Child Development Center, Seattle, Washington (Maternal and Child Nutrition)

Catherine E. Woteki, Ph.D., R.D., Deputy Director, Division of Health Examination Statistics, National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control, Hyattsville, Maryland (Introduction and Background)

Richard J. Wurtman, M.D., Professor, Department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences, Director, Clinical Research Center, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts (Neurologic Disorders; Behavior)

Elizabeth Yetley, Ph.D., R.D., Chief, Clinical Nutrition, Division of Nutrition, Office of Nutrition and Food Sciences, Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, Food and Drug Administration, Washington, D.C. (Introduction and Background)
During preparation of the Report, chapters were subjected to six stages of
critical review, three by experts within the Public Health Service (internal
reviews) and three by scientists and professionals recommended as experts
by national scientific and nutrition professional organizations in the private
sector (external reviews). In addition, the senior editorial advisors and staff
to the Nutrition Policy Board listed above provided expert technical eval-
uation throughout the review process.

Individuals who reviewed chapters or portions of the Report were:

Phyllis B. Acosta, Dr.P.H., R.D., Director of Metabolic Diseases, Ross
Laboratories, Columbus, Ohio

Lawrence Agodoa, M.D., Coordinator, National Institute of Diabetes and
Digestive and Kidney Diseases, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda,
Maryland

Duane F. Alexander, M.D., Director, National Institute of Child Health
and Human Development, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Mary-
land

Aaron M. Altschul, Ph.D., Diet Management and Eating Disorders Pro-
gram, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C.

Ronald A. Arky, M.D., Professor, Department of Medicine, Harvard
Medical School at Mt. Auburn Hospital, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Louis Avioli, M.D., Professor of Medicine and Oral Biology, Washington
University School of Medicine and Dental School, St. Louis, Missouri

David Badman, Ph.D., Hematology Program Director, National Institute
of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, National Institutes of
Health, Bethesda, Maryland

John Bailar III, M.D., Ph.D., Science Advisor, Office of Disease Preven-
tion and Health Promotion, Washington, D.C.

David H. Baker, Ph.D., Professor of Nutrition and Metabolism, University
of Illinois, Urbana, Illinois

Susan Blumenthal, M.D., Medical Officer and Chief, Behavioral Medicine
Program, National Institute of Mental Health, Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and
Mental Health Administration, Rockville, Maryland

Ronette Briefel, Dr.P.H., R.D., Nutritional Epidemiologist, Survey Planning
and Development Branch, National Center for Health Statistics, Centers
for Disease Control, Hyattsville, Maryland

xxiii
Benjamin Burton, Ph.D., Associate Director for Disease Prevention and Technology Transfer, National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland

Ritva Butrum, Ph.D., Diet and Cancer Branch, Division of Cancer Prevention and Control, National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland

Charles E. Butterworth, Jr., M.D., Director, Clinical Nutrition Research Unit, University of Alabama, Birmingham, Alabama

George F. Cahill, Jr., M.D., Howard Hughes Medical Institute, Boston, Massachusetts

Doris H. Calloway, Ph.D., Provost Professor Schools and College, University of California, Berkeley, California

Richard Calvera, M.D., Medical Research Nutritionist, Experimental Nutrition Branch, Office of Nutrition and Food Sciences, Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, Food and Drug Administration, Washington, D.C.

Mona Calvo, Ph.D., R.D., Nutritionist, Clinical Nutrition, Division of Nutrition, Office of Nutrition and Food Sciences, Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, Food and Drug Administration, Washington, D.C.

James P. Carlos, D.D.S., Chief, Epidemiology Branch, Epidemiology and Oral Disease Prevention Program, National Institute of Dental Research, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland

Kenneth K. Carroll, Ph.D., Professor, Department of Biochemistry, University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada

Ranjit K. Chandra, M.D., F.R.C.P., Janeway Child Health Center, Immunology Department, St. John’s, Newfoundland, Canada

Lois Chatham, Ph.D., Director, Division of Basic Research, National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Administration, Rockville, Maryland

Aram V. Chobanian, M.D., Director and Professor, Cardiovascular Institute, Boston University School of Medicine, Boston, Massachusetts

Joginder G. Chopra, M.D., Special Assistant, Medical Affairs, Office of Nutrition and Food Sciences, Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, Food and Drug Administration, Washington, D.C.
Gregory Christenson, Ph.D., Special Population Studies Branch, Division of Cancer Prevention and Control, National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland

Carolyn Clifford, Ph.D., Diet and Cancer Branch, Division of Cancer Prevention and Control, National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland

James D. Cook, M.D., Division of Hematology, University of Kansas Medical Center, Kansas City, Kansas


Ann Coulston, M.S., R.D., Clinical Research Center, Stanford University Hospital, Stanford, California

Frances Cronin, Ph.D., R.D., Chief, Diet Appraisal Research Branch, Nutrition Education Division, Human Nutrition Information Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Hyattsville, Maryland

Cheryl L. Damberg, M.P.H., Director of Marketing, General Health Inc., Washington, D.C.

Michele DeBartolo, M.P.H., R.D., Senior Clinical Research Associate, Pharmaceutical Products Division, Abbott Laboratories, Abbott Park, Illinois

Hector F. DeLuca, Ph.D., Department of Biochemistry, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin

Dominick P. DePaola, D.D.S., Ph.D., Dean, University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, New Jersey Dental School, Newark, New Jersey

Vincent T. DeVita, Jr., M.D., Director, National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland

Karen Donato, M.S., R.D., Nutritionist, National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland

Allan L. Drash, M.D., Professor of Pediatrics, University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
Mary Dufour, M.D., Chief, Epidemiology Branch, Division of Biometry and Epidemiology, National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Administration, Rockville, Maryland

Harriet P. Dustan, M.D., Veterans Administration Distinguished Physician and University Distinguished Professor Emeritus, Veterans Administration Medical Center, University of Alabama at Birmingham, Birmingham, Alabama

Mary Egan, R.D., M.S., M.P.H., National Center for Education in Maternal and Child Health, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C.

Shirley Ekvall, Ph.D., R.D., Professor and Chief of Nutrition Services, University of Cincinnati and University Affiliated Cincinnati Center for Developmental Disorders, Children’s Hospital Medical Center, Cincinnati, Ohio

Lillian Emmons, Ph.D., R.D., Comprehensive Psychiatric Services, Inc., Cleveland, Ohio

Arnold Engel, M.D., Commission Officer, Medical Statistics Branch, National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control, Hyattsville, Maryland

Frank Falkner, M.D., F.R.C.P., School of Public Health, University of California, Berkeley, California

Marilyn E. Farrand, M.S., R.D., Public Health Nutrition, Prevention and Demonstration Research Branch, Division of Epidemiology and Clinical Application, National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland

Owen Fennema, Ph.D., Department of Food Science, University of Wisconsin at Madison, Madison, Wisconsin

John D. Femstrom, Ph.D., Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Neuroscience, University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Willis R. Foster, M.D., Senior Staff Physician, Office of Disease Prevention and Technology Transfer, National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland

Judith Fradkin, M.D., Chief, Endocrine and Metabolic Diseases Programs Branch, National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland
Victor Frattali, Ph.D., Deputy Director, Division of Nutrition, Office of Nutrition and Food Sciences, Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, Food and Drug Administration, Washington, D.C.

Robert A. Fried, M.D., Associate Professor and Director of Clinical Affairs, Department of Family Medicine, University of Colorado School of Medicine, Denver, Colorado

Edward D. Frohlich, M.D., Alton Ochsner Distinguished Scientist and Vice President for Academic Affairs, Alton Ochsner Medical Foundation, Staff Member, Section on Hypertensive Diseases, Ochsner Clinic, New Orleans, Louisiana

Peter Frommer, M.D., Deputy Director, National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland

Margie Gallagher, Ph.D., R.D., School of Home Economics, Institute for Coastal and Marine Resources, East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina

Dian Gans, M.S., Research Assistant, Department of Nutritional Sciences, University of Wisconsin at Madison, Madison, Wisconsin

Stanley M. Garn, Ph.D., Center for Human Growth and Development, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan

Peter Gergen, M.D., Commission Officer, Medical Statistics Branch, National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control, Hyattsville, Maryland

Dorothy W. Gietzen, Ph.D., Assistant Research Neurophysiologist, Department of Physiologic Sciences, School of Veterinary Medicine, Department of Psychiatry, School of Medicine, University of California at Davis, Davis, California

Susan Gilbert, M.P.A., Associate, Prospect Associates, Rockville, Maryland

Walter H. Glinsmann, M.D., Associate Director, Clinical Nutrition, Division of Nutrition, Food and Drug Administration, Washington, D.C.

Vay Liang W. Go, M.D., Chairman, Nutrition Coordinating Committee, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland

Murray Goldstein, D.O., M.P.H., Director, National Institute of Neurological and Communicative Disorders and Stroke, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland
DeWitt S. Goodman, M.D., Professor of Medicine, Department of Medicine, College of Physicians and Surgeons of Columbia University, New York, New York

Phillip Gorden, M.D., Director, National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland

Enoch Gordis, M.D., Director, National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, Alcohol, Drug Abuse and Mental Health Administration, Rockville, Maryland

Stephen L. Gordon, Ph.D., Director, Musculoskeletal Diseases Program, National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland

Gilman D. Grave, M.D., Chief, Endocrinology, Nutrition, and Growth Branch, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland

Jesse F. Gregory III, Ph.D., University of Florida, Food Science and Nutrition Department, Gainesville, Florida

Joan Gussow, Ed.D., Mary Swartz Rose Professor of Nutrition and Education, Department of Nutrition and Education, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York

Wilbur Hadden, M.A., Chief, Programming Staff, National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control, Hyattsville, Maryland

Evan Hadley, M.D., Chief, Geriatrics Branch, National Institute on Aging, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland

Carole Haines, M.P.H., Data Analysis Coordinator, National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland

Judith G. Hallfrisch, Ph.D., Senior Staff Fellow, Metabolism Section of the Gerontology Research Center, National Institute on Aging, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland

Charles H. Halsted, M.D., Ph.D., Chief, Division of Clinical Nutrition, and Professor of Internal Medicine, School of Medicine, University of California at Davis, Davis, California

Linda Harris, Ph.D., Special Assistant, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Washington, D.C.

xxviii
Tamara Harris, M.D., Service Fellow, Office of Analysis and Epidemiology Program, National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control, Hyattsville, Maryland

John N. Hathcock, Ph.D., Chief, Experimental Nutrition Branch, Division of Nutrition, Food and Drug Administration, Washington, D.C.

Maureen Henderson, M.D., Cancer Prevention Research Program, Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center, Seattle, Washington

Stephen P. Heyse, M.D., Director, Disease Prevention, Epidemiology and Clinical Applications, National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland

Jules Hirsch, M.D., Professor and Senior Physician, Rockefeller University, New York, New York

Gladys Hirshman, M.D., Director, Chronic Renal Disease Program, National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland

Peter R. Holt, M.D., Chief, Division of Gastroenterology, Professor of Medicine, College of Physicians and Surgeons, St. Luke's Hospital, New York, New York

Steven S. Hotta, M.D., Ph.D., Medical Officer, Clinical Nutrition Branch, Division of Nutrition, Food and Drug Administration, Washington, D.C.

Anastacio M. Hoyumpa, M.D., Professor of Medicine, Division of Gastroenterology and Nutrition, University of Texas Health Science Center, San Antonio, Texas

Van S. Hubbard, M.D., Ph.D., Director, Nutritional Sciences Branch, National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland

Sandra Huckaby, R.N., M.S.N., Special Assistant, Maternal and Infant Health Branch, Bureau of Maternal and Child Health and Resources Development, Health Resources and Services Administration, Rockville, Maryland

James C. Hunt, M.D., Chancellor, University of Tennessee, Memphis, Tennessee

Vince L. Hutchins, M.D., M.P.H., Deputy Director, Bureau of Maternal and Child Health and Resources Development, Health Resources and Services Administration, Rockville, Maryland
William T. Jarvis, Ph.D., Professor of Health Education, Department of Preventive Medicine, School of Medicine, Loma Linda University, Loma Linda, California

Clifford Johnson, M.S.P.H., Chief, Nutrition Statistics Branch, National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control, Hyattsville, Maryland

Norman Kaplan, M.D., Professor of Internal Medicine, University of Texas Health Science Center, Dallas, Texas

Gerald T. Keusch, M.D., Professor of Medicine, Department of Medicine, New England Medical Center, Boston, Massachusetts

Matthew Kinnard, Ph.D., Health Scientist Administrator, National Institute of Dental Research, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland

Samuel Korper, Ph.D., Associate Director, Office of Planning, Analysis, and Communications, National Institute on Aging, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland

David Kritchevsky, Ph.D., Associate Director of Anatomy and Biology, Wistar Institute, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Robert Kuczmarksi, M.S.P.H., M.P.H., Dr.P.H., R.D., Health Statistician, Nutrition Statistics Branch, National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control, Hyattsville, Maryland

William Lands, Ph.D., Department of Biochemistry, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, Illinois

Lynn A. Larsen, Ph.D., Associate Director, Program Development, Division of Nutrition, Office of Nutrition and Food Sciences, Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, Food and Drug Administration, Washington, D.C.

Reva C. Lawrence, M.P.H., Epidemiologist, Data Systems, Program Officer, National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland

Claude Lenfant, M.D., Director, National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland

Gilbert A. Leveille, Ph.D., Staff Vice President, NABISCO Brands, Inc., East Hanover, New Jersey
Marsel Mesulam, M.D., Professor of Neurology, Harvard Medical School, Director, Division of Neuroscience and Behavioral Neurology, Beth Israel Hospital, Boston, Massachusetts

Esteban Mezey, M.D., Professor of Medicine, Johns Hopkins Hospital, Baltimore, Maryland

Angela D. Mickalide, Ph.D., Staff Coordinator, U.S. Preventive Services Task Force, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Washington, D.C.

William E. Mitch, M.D., Renal Division, Emory University School of Medicine, Atlanta, Georgia

Elaine R. Monsen, Ph.D., R.D., University of Washington, Seattle, Washington

Steven R. Moore, M.P.H., Associate Chief of Staff, Office of the Surgeon General, Rockville, Maryland

Hamish N. Munro, M.D., D.Sc., Senior Scientist, USDA Human Nutrition Research Center on Aging, Tufts University, Boston, Massachusetts

Juan M. Navia, Ph.D., Professor and Chairman, Department of Public Health Sciences, Schools of Public Health and Dentistry, University of Alabama at Birmingham, Birmingham, Alabama

Buford L. Nichols, Jr., M.D., Children’s Nutrition Research Laboratory, Baylor School of Medicine, Houston, Texas

Phillip Nieburg, M.D., M.P.H., Medical Epidemiologist, Division of Nutrition, Centers for Disease Control, Atlanta, Georgia

Daniel W. Nixon, M.D., Associate Director, Cancer Prevention Research Program, National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland

Marie U. Nylen, D.D.S., Dr. Odont. h.c., Director, Extramural Program, National Institute of Dental Research, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland

Carole A. Palmer, M.Ed., R.D., Associate Professor and Division Co-Chairman, Division of Nutrition and Prevention Dentistry, Tufts University School of Medicine, Boston, Massachusetts
Jean K. Tews, Ph.D., Department of Biochemistry, University of Wisconsin at Madison, Madison, Wisconsin

Jeanne L. Tillotson, R.D., M.A., Crofton, Maryland

Phillip P. Toskes, M.D., Professor of Medicine and Director, Division of Gastroenterology, Hepatology and Nutrition, University of Florida College of Medicine and Gainesville Veterans Administration Medical Center, Gainesville, Florida

Pelagia Turyn-Einhorn, M.D., Medical Officer, Clinical Nutrition Branch, Division of Nutrition, Office of Nutrition and Food Sciences, Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, Food and Drug Administration, Washington, D.C.

Ernestine Vanderveen, Ph.D., Associate Director for AIDS, Division of Clinical Research, National Institute on Drug Abuse, Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Administration, Rockville, Maryland

John E. Vanderveen, Ph.D., Director, Division of Nutrition, Food and Drug Administration, Washington, D.C.

John Wallingford, Ph.D., Nutritionist, Clinical Nutrition Branch, Division of Nutrition, Office of Nutrition and Food Sciences, Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, Food and Drug Administration, Washington, D.C.

Donald M. Watkin, A.B., M.D., M.P.H., Manager, Occupational Health Division, Office of Aviation Medicine, Federal Aviation Administration, U.S. Department of Transportation, and Research Professor, Department of Medicine, School of Medicine and Health Sciences, The George Washington University, Washington, D.C.

Richard Weindruch, Ph.D., Health Scientist Administrator, National Institute on Aging, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland

Gerald Wheeler, Commission Officer, Division of Health Examination Statistics, National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control, Hyattsville, Maryland

Philip L. White, Sc.D., Wilmette, Illinois, Director, Division of Applied Medical Sciences, American Medical Association, Chicago, Illinois (Retired)

T. Franklin Williams, M.D., Director, National Institute on Aging, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland
David F. Williamson, M.S., Ph.D., Analytic Epidemiologist, Centers for Disease Control, Atlanta, Georgia

Myron Winick, M.D., R.R. Williams Professor of Nutrition and Pediatrics, Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons, New York, New York

Deborah Winn, Ph.D., Epidemiologist, Survey Planning and Development Branch, National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control, Hyattsville, Maryland

Maxwell M. Wintrobe, M.D., Ph.D., D.Sc., Distinguished Professor of Medicine, University of Utah Medical School, Salt Lake City, Utah

Elisabeth P. Wirick, Food, Nutrition, and Dietetics, College of Health and Human Services, University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, Colorado

Eleanor A. Young, Ph.D., R.D., L.D., Professor, Department of Medicine, Division of Gastroenterology and Nutrition, University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio, San Antonio, Texas

William J. Zukel, M.D., Deputy Director, Division of Heart and Vascular Diseases, National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland

The editors gratefully acknowledge the contributions of the following staff members and others who assisted in the preparation of this Report:

- Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion
  
  
  Mary Jo Deering, Ph.D., Publications Manager
  
  James A. Harrell, M.A., Deputy Director
  
  Susan K. Maloney, M.H.S., Director, Health Communication Staff
  
  David G. Schardt, M.S., Ph.D., Nutrition Consultant, Nutrition Media Network, Washington, D.C.
  
  Marilyn K. Schulenberg, Staff Assistant
  

xxxvi