Status report on nutrition in the news

These days, food is front-page news. In fact, ADA's 1997 Nutrition Trends Survey found that most Americans get their nutrition information from mass media outlets—57% from television, 44% from magazines, and 23% from newspapers. Only 5% of the people surveyed received nutrition information from dietitians, and only 9% from doctors (1).

One side effect of this phenomenon is widespread consumer confusion. In a 1997 National Health Council survey, 68% of consumers agreed with the statement, "When reporting medical and health news, the media often contradict themselves, so I don't know what to believe." (2)

In response to this disturbing trend, the Harvard School of Public Health and the International Food Information Council Foundation convened an advisory group to develop guidelines for communicating nutrition, food safety, and health information to the public. The group included opinion leaders across the communication chain, who in turn gathered input from more than 70 nutrition researchers, food scientists, journal editors, university press officers, broadcast and print reporters, consumer groups, and food industry executives.

The guidelines recognize the various players in the communications process, with general recommendations for all communicators and specific ones for scientists; journal editors; journalists; and industry, consumer, and interest groups. They try to ensure that sound science and improved public understanding are the ultimate guides in communicating (3).

Have the guidelines helped to improve nutrition and health reporting? According to the International Food Information Council (IFIC) Foundation's latest survey, they have.

The IFIC Foundation's 1999 survey of diet, food safety, and health news, conducted by the Center for Media and Public Affairs, examined the coverage in 39 local and national news outlets from May through July 1999 and compared the results to its 1997 and 1995 survey findings (4).

- Coverage of food news rose 53% in 1999 compared to 1997, despite the removal of four newspapers and four television programs from the sample.
- The 1999 survey observed more focus on the benefits of food than ever before. Disease prevention and the benefits of certain foods became more central to news coverage. For the first time, the number of claims of health benefits outpaced claims of harm associated with foods (57% versus 43%).
- News accounts mentioned specific nutrients and other attributes of foods 26% more frequently in 1999 than in 1997.
- The number of reports on new research studies rose from 77 in 1997 to 190 in 1999.
- Researchers became the most numerous group of sources for the first time in 1999. Food producers were second in the source parade at greatly increased numbers over 1997.

News reports lack context

On the downside, the IFIC media analysis found that news accounts rarely provide a context for the advice they offer. In fact, when it came to linking health claims to scientific research, 1999 represents a decline from 1997 levels. In 1997, 34% of recommendations or warnings were linked to scientific evidence. By 1999, that proportion plunged to 18%. In all three years, most of the citations consisted only of vague references such as "studies show."

By the same token, stories about eating more or less of a food rarely specified how much, how often, or to whom the advice applied. In 1999, when associating a food with a potential harm or benefit, only one in eight statements included details of the amount consumed or a specific population to which the advice applied, and only one in ten referenced the frequency of consumption.

Penny Kris-Etherton, PhD, RD, Distinguished Professor of Nutrition at Penn State University, capsulized the challenge of mass communication: The messages have to be simple enough to be understood by everyone, but oversimplification can be counterproductive. "There are so many reports on the good effects of fiber, omega-3 fatty acids, and the like that consumers don't know how to incorporate all these foods into their diets without taking on extra calories," Kris-Etherton explained. Another case in point is the media's coverage of fats. Reports have effectively conveyed warnings about fats and heart disease, but they have ignored the connection between fats and calories, she said. As a result, many weight-conscious consum-

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ers mistakenly believe that fat-free means calorie-free. She urges dietetics professionals to "help people translate the stream of nutrition messages into practical applications."

Limited number of sources cited

Another study of nutrition-related reporting in five newspapers over a six-month period in 1995 found that the papers routinely cited only a few journals. Out of 148 articles citing 43 different journals, 59% were from the same five journals (5).

When asked about this finding, Jeanne Goldberg, PhD, RD, professor of nutrition and director of the Center on Nutrition Communication in the Tufts University School of Nutrition Science & Policy, offered a simple explanation: The sources they quote are the ones that provide them with information. "Whereas scientists used to shun the limelight, they now see the benefits of media coverage," she observed. "Many organizations routinely send press releases on their studies. When reporters need a statement or background information, they draw upon a cadre of trusted sources who are credible, articulate, and accessible."

Underscoring Kris-Etherton's observation on the need for dietetics professionals to help people understand and apply nutrition information, Goldberg noted that the master's degree program at the Tufts Center on Nutrition Communication is training young RDs to be effective nutrition communicators.

Although new information about health and nutrition usually originates with scientific research, the news media are the most visible messengers of this information, so they are often blamed for making science seem revolutionary rather than evolutionary. "Nutrition is not a science of breaking news," says Goldberg.

Raeanne Sarazen RD, test kitchen director for the *Chicago Tribune,* agrees that dietitians are generally far removed from mass communication, so food, health, and science reporters don't think of them when they need a source. She has been on the job for about a year now, and although she was not hired because of her RD credentials, she noted that because she is an RD, which her two predecessors were not, she is able bring a level of nutrition expertise to her position. In her weekly column she tries to hit upon issues in nutrition education.

> News accounts rarely provide a context for the advice they offer

The problem of nutrition misinformation is compounded by the Internet, which Goldberg calls an "unrefereed forum." In fact, respondents in the 1997 National Health Council survey found the Internet to be the last believable source of medical and health news.

What should you tell your clients

The next time a client asks about a "good" or "bad" food that was discussed on the evening news, tell him or her about the *10 Red Flags of Junk Science,* developed by the Food and Nutrition Science Alliance. FANSA is a partnership of four professional scientific societies, including ADA, whose members have joined forces to speak with one voice on food and nutrition science. The *10 Red Flags of Junk Science* are:

1. Recommendations that promise a quick fix.
2. Dire warnings of danger form a single product or regimen.
3. Claims that sound too good to be true.
4. Simplistic conclusions drawn form a complex study.
5. Recommendations based on a single study.
6. Dramatic statements that are refuted by reputable scientific organizations.
7. Lists of "good" and "bad" foods.
8. Recommendations made to help sell a product.
9. Recommendations based on studies published without peer review.
10. Recommendations from studies that ignore differences among individuals or groups.

References

1. The American Dietetic Association. Nutrition Trends Survey, 1997.
2. National Health Council. *Americans Talk about Science and Medical News.* Washington, DC: National Health Council; 1997.
3. Fineberg HV, Rowe S. *Improving Public Understanding: Guidelines for Communicating Emerging Science on Nutrition, Food Safety, and Health. J Natl Cancer Inst.* 1998; 90:194-200. A complete copy of the guidelines can be accessed at IFIC Foundation On-line at http://ificinfo.health.org/resource/guidelines/htm.
4. International Food Information Council and the Center for Media and Public Affairs. *Food for Thought III: A Quantitative and Qualitative Content Analysis of Diet, Nutrition, and Food Safety Reporting.* Washington, DC: IFIC; 2000.
5. Hackman EM, Moe GE. Evaluation of newspaper reports of nutrition-related research. *J Am Diet Assoc.* 1999;98:1564-66.