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Human nutrition research needs a leader

Research in human nutrition continues to attract considerable national attention, but thus far the attention has not been translated into a well-defined national research policy, supported by an infusion of new money from Congress. On the contrary, the situation appears to be more chaotic than ever. Everyone seems to want a piece of the action, but no single body seems able to exert the leadership necessary to the formation of an effective program.

In a recently released review and assessment of agricultural and food research issues compiled by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, human nutrition research is described as being at a "primitive level" in this country. The report repeats the oft-heard criticism that "current knowledge of nutritional requirements is more complete for poultry, cattle, sheep, and swine than it is for humans."

Some might argue with the harshness of that portrayal, but there can be little debate about the fact that there is much we do not know about food and human nutrition.

While we have learned much about human needs for major elements and major nutrients, we still know very little about requirements for trace elements, and we're not at all sure of the relationship of diet to disease. We do not have the analytical procedures to determine the composition of some of our basic foods.

To an extent the rising interest in human nutrition is a cyclical phenomenon. Similar interest was generated by research discoveries in vitamins some years ago. Public interest soon faded, however, and we slipped into a period during which housewives came to believe that if their families got enough vitamins and minerals, they were essentially well nourished.

Interest began to pick up again in the late 1960's as studies revealed serious gaps in our nutritional knowledge. Spurred on by the diet/heart disease controversy, concern about food additives and chemical residues, and a growing health consciousness, the public began to express concern about what they eat (although witnessing what they often ingest gives one cause to wonder about the depth of that concern). Predictably,

as the public voiced its concern, nutrition research became an attractive cause, politically and in the press, akin to motherhood and country. There are currently 14 congressional committees and 20 subcommittees investigating or otherwise involved in national nutritional needs.

Unfortunately, instead of generating new research funds and a clearly-defined national nutrition research policy, the intense level of interest has created greater confusion. It has brought into sharp focus the duplication of effort and overlapping responsibilities of government agencies for human nutrition research, particularly between the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, but also including others. There are now 14 separate federal agencies in seven different departments conducting human nutrition research. They do not even agree on the definition of what constitutes nutrition research. Each agency establishes its own research goals and priorities.

In this confusing atmosphere it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine how much is actually being spent on nutrition research, and even more difficult to assess realistically how much additional support is required. It is small wonder that Congress is asking hard questions and is showing reluctance to put up new research funds.

The need for additional research has been well documented. It is real. It is urgent. We have eliminated hunger as a major problem in this nation, but we have not delved into the more illusive aspects of nutrition, such as the effects of diets on our intellect, our heart, our vigor, our life span.

All evidence points to the likelihood that well-ordered scientific inquiries into these aspects of nutrition research will prove even more productive and more profitable than our successes of the past.

Until the responsible agencies get their acts together, however, and come up with a cohesive national policy, we are likely to see nutrition research remain largely a matter of political rhetoric.