The many roles of ASN scientists in the Dietary Guidelines for Americans process¹,²

Sarah D. Ohlhorst*

American Society for Nutrition, Bethesda, MD

ASN as science leader

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans are the cornerstone of federal nutrition policy and education activities. Issued jointly by the USDA and the Department of Health and Human Services, the guidelines are updated every 5 y to address nutrition issues affecting all Americans. The American Society for Nutrition (ASN) is proud to have 13 members serve on the 15-member 2015 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee (DGAC), including the chair and vice-chair. The committee is composed of nationally recognized nutrition and health experts who review current scientific and medical evidence to determine whether sufficient new data exist since the publication of the previous guidelines to warrant revisions. The DGAC prepares a report (1) with recommended revisions to the Dietary Guidelines and their rationale for the department secretaries, who then jointly review the committee’s recommendations to create and publish the revised Dietary Guidelines for Americans. ASN submitted oral and written comments throughout the past advisory committee’s deliberations to influence the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (2), which were released on January 31, 2011. The focus now is on disseminating the guidelines to Americans and helping them understand and translate the recommendations into healthy eating behaviors they can implement on a daily basis. New studies documenting their progress and the impact of diet on health will proceed as the process to determine the 2015 Dietary Guidelines is underway.

ASN as strategic partner

MyPlate, an iconic graphic to help consumers eat according to the Dietary Guidelines, was unveiled on June 2, 2011, to replace the former MyPyramid graphic. ASN is a National Strategic Partner in the Nutrition Communicators Network of the USDA Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion, which provides an opportunity to help promote the Dietary Guidelines. The ASN and the USDA Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion launched a successful webinar series aimed at presenting an easily comprehended set of strategies, recommendations, and communications to help clinicians implement the 2010 Dietary Guidelines. Each webinar reviewed 2 chapters from the Dietary Guidelines on topics including “Balancing Calories to Manage Weight: Recommendations, Barriers, Strategies, and Communications,” “Food and Nutrients to Increase and Food and Food Components to Reduce,” and “Fostering Healthy Eating Patterns and Food Choices.” More than 540 nutrition professionals registered for the first webinar alone!

ASN as key communicator of dietary guidance to consumers

As ongoing efforts to share and apply the nutrition recommendations from the Dietary Guidelines continue, are consumers actually adjusting their eating habits to follow the Dietary Guidelines and MyPlate? It appears that most Americans have different contents on their plates than what the MyPlate graphic recommends. The NPD Group, Inc. (formerly National Purchase Diary), used their National Eating Trends research to determine how often consumers eat at least 70% of the daily recommended intake for dairy, fruit, grains, proteins, and vegetables each day. For the average consumer, their intake on just 7 days per year (or 2% of their consuming days) matched MyPlate. There are clear challenges for the USDA, the Department of Health and Human Services, nutrition educators, and others in getting consumers to follow the nutrition guidance imparted by the Dietary Guidelines.

The Dietary Guidelines Alliance, a public-private partnership dedicated to providing consumers with science-based, practical advice on how to apply the Dietary Guidelines to their lives, has worked to address consumer research gaps and to discover the potentially most effective ways to reach consumers. The alliance, of which ASN is a member, conducted a 3-phase consumer research project in 2010 to determine messages developed around 6 core concepts consistent with the 2010 Dietary Guidelines that resonate most with parents of children aged 2–17 y. The alliance’s qualitative and quantitative findings, “Putting the Dietary Guidelines for Americans into Action: Behavior-Directed Messages to Motivate Parents—Phase I and II Observational and Focus Group Findings,” were published in the February 2013 issue of the Journal of the Academy for Nutrition and Dietetics (3). “Putting the Dietary Guidelines for Americans into Action: Behavior-Directed Messages to Motivate Parents—Phase III Quantitative Message Testing and Survey Evaluation” was published in

¹ This article was reviewed by Linda Van Horn, Professor of Preventive Medicine and Associate Dean for Faculty Development, Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, Chair of the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans Advisory Committee, and a member of ASN’s Public Policy Committee. Final review and approval was provided by ASN President Teresa A. Davis.
² The author declares no conflicts of interest.
*Address correspondence to S Ohlhorst, American Society for Nutrition, 9650 Rockville Pike, Bethesda, MD 20814. E-mail: sohlhorst@nutrition.org.
the March 2013 issue (4). Perceived barriers to being healthy included cost, taste, time, accessibility, and lack of motivation and know-how. Motivating factors included the desire to feel better; a physician’s recommendation to manage a health condition, such as weight; and related advice from the media or recipes. Across the tested core behaviors that parents could implement to affect the healthfulness of their family’s diet, the study showed parents are least likely to believe that paying attention to calories can make a difference. However, there is nearly universal agreement among the parents studied that serving nutrient-rich foods could affect the healthfulness of their family’s diet. The messages that resonate most with consumers on the basis of the core behaviors tested are shown in Table 1.

Future opportunities for ASN members

ASN and its members will continue to stay involved in the implementation of the guidelines and the deliberation of the 2015 Dietary Guidelines for Americans. ASN members who are health professionals and educators can integrate the Dietary Guidelines Alliance consumer-tested messages into their practices, programs, and interventions. Members who are nutrition scientists can conduct and publish research in the scientific literature to influence the 2015 Dietary Guidelines, because the nutrition recommendations that make up the guidelines must be evidence based. For research to be considered by the 2015 DGAC, it ideally should be published in peer-reviewed scientific literature from 2010 (after consideration by the 2010 DGAC) throughout the 2013 calendar year. ASN nominated numerous qualified nutrition science professionals to serve on the 2015 DGAC and will provide input to the advisory committee through oral and written comments.

References