In Memoriam

D Mark Hegsted, PhD (1914–2009)

The field of nutrition has lost a member of our community who, during his lifetime, made important contributions in the areas of nutrition science and nutrition policy. D Mark Hegsted was a quiet, modest, and unassuming man who on more than one occasion surprised many with his tenacity in fighting for what he thought was right, regardless of the odds against him or the professional costs.

Hegsted was born on a farm in Rexburg, Idaho. His early life was marked by the usual activities of rural farm life, from birthing calves to shooting prey. For those of us who knew him in his later years it is a bit hard to picture him pitching hay or hopping on a horse to go into town. Nonetheless, these skills came in particularly handy when, as a young faculty member, he supplemented his income by bringing some surplus experimental chicks to his home (before the days of Institutional Animal Care and Use Committees) in Wellesley, MA, to provide eggs and chicken throughout the winter for his family and neighbors. Particularly interesting was his solution to the raccoon problem that threatened his enterprise. He borrowed a gun to, as he said, “shoot the offender,” which caused a considerable stir among his colleagues the following day.

Hegsted attended the University of Idaho, where he worked his way through college by washing dishes, and graduated in 1936. He then entered the University of Wisconsin and earned a PhD in 1940. He said that the reason he decided to pursue a PhD rather than an MD was because there was graduate support for the former but not the latter. Immediately after completing his PhD, he went to work as a research chemist for Abbott Laboratories but soon realized that his heart was in academic research. That resulted in his recruitment to the nascent Department of Nutrition at the Harvard School of Public Health. Soon after his move, a former colleague from Abbott who was visiting Hegsted commented on the dismal state of his new laboratory and predicted that he would return in short order. That proved to be a poor prediction. Hegsted remained at Harvard for the next 38 y.

Through the people Hegsted met at the School of Public Health, he was invited to establish nutrition laboratories in Bogota, Colombia, and later, Lima, Peru. In Peru, he carried out seminal studies on calcium requirements in a penitentiary. One of the stories he enjoyed recounting was how the research dietitian he had hired to run the study fell in love with a convict and married him upon his release. Hegsted also noted the uncomfortable feeling he had when the inmates offered to help in the research kitchen, and so he had “murderers wielding large knives and cleavers.”

Probably most well known is Hegsted’s work on plasma cholesterol response to changes in dietary fatty acids and cholesterol, which resulted in the Hegsted equation. Lesser known are the important contributions he and his research team made in the area of protein nutrition (of interest to the federal government after World War II due to food shortages) and mineral nutrition, particularly calcium and iron. Over the years, Hegsted was the author or coauthor of >400 publications.

In a second career, Hegsted went to Washington, DC, in 1978 to serve in the newly created post of Administrator of Human Nutrition in the US Department of Agriculture. During his tenure, the US Department of Agriculture issued the Dietary Goals for Americans. This basic dietary guidance, which was intended to educate the general public, ignited a firestorm of protests from friends and foes alike, revealing the intense tension between the scientific community, industry, and politicians. Interestingly, despite the remarkable controversy the document created and its eventual retraction, the Dietary Goals for Americans was the forerunner of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, and although the wording changed over the years the basic concepts remain relatively intact to this day. Unfortunately, due to the controversy created by the Dietary Goals for Americans and the unyielding stance Hegsted took, his US Department of Agriculture position was terminated. Regardless of professional cost, he never expressed regret for his position in the controversy. He returned to Boston in 1982 where for the next 4 y he served as the Associate Director for Research at Harvard University’s New England Regional Primate Research Center.


Among the numerous awards he received were the Osborne and Mendel Award, the Conrad A Elvehjem Award, and the Distinguished Recognition Award from the American Dietetic Association. In 1993 he shared the Bristol-Myers Squibb/Mead Johnson Award for Distinguished Achievement in Nutrition Research with Ancel Keys. In 2007 Hegsted received the Professor Emeritus Award for Merit from the Harvard School of Public Health. An annual Stare-Hegsted Lecture was established at the institution where he spent the majority of his career.

Hegsted was warm and friendly. With the exception of private time in his office on Saturday mornings, his office door was always open to anyone needing advice. He and his wife, Maxine, opened their house on many occasions to his trainees and coworkers. Maxine was a painter of local note, and many of us were fortunate recipients of her work.

In Hegsted’s later years, he used his farming skills to grow flowers and generously shared the bounty with his neighbors. He also remained intellectually agile, and for quite awhile was one of the top bridge players within his community. He trained and was professionally active during a very exciting time during which the essential nutrients were discovered and their biological effects elucidated. Yet, as he noted, Hegsted also lived through a period of time in which he saw the discipline of nutrition expand well beyond the role of nutrients in preventing deficiency diseases. Amazingly, Hegsted once indicated that, during his adult life, his body weight never varied more than ±1 lb. He understood that this was a rare phenomenon and often mused about why this was the case. His interest in the field of nutrition never waned.

Hegsted is survived by his son Eric, 3 grandchildren, and 1 great granddaughter. The death of his wife and daughter preceded his.

I am indebted to Eric Hegsted for providing much of the material used to prepare this article.

The author had no conflicts of interest.

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