Introduction

On the Road to Better Nutrition

Eileen Kennedy, James Blaylock, and Betsey Kuhn

As the Deputy Under Secretary for Research, Education, and Economics, I am quite pleased that the Economic Research Service took the responsibility for planning, coordinating, and producing this book. But it is as a nutritionist and researcher that I am truly grateful. An effort mobilizing experts from a wide range of fields—from nutritionists to economists—to examine America's eating habits is indeed a worthwhile undertaking. However, to succeed in such grand fashion is unusual. This book is truly a road map to understanding the complex world of food choices and diets. I am honored to have coauthored this introduction.

*–**Eileen Kennedy***

Improved nutrition has been the cornerstone upon which all modern societies and economies were built. Adequate nutrition frees a nation and its people to pursue goals that improve the human condition. A nation whose basic nutritional needs are met is healthier, more productive, and can focus its energies on educational attainment, improved housing, enhanced medical care, and the provision of goods and services associated with a highly developed society. However, in modern America, the past problems of low caloric intakes and inadequate consumption of vitamins and minerals have been supplanted by poor diets of a different hue and with different

Blaylock is Associate Director and Kuhn is Director of the Food and Rural Economics Division, Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture.

implications. In America today, poor diets are typically too high in calories and fats, and too low in fruits and vegetables—problems associated with certain chronic diseases and obesity. While the dietary problems may be different today, one thing remains the same—poor eating habits still exact a heavy toll on individuals and society.

A century ago, nutritional problems centered on the inadequate intakes of certain vitamins and minerals, resulting in nutritional deficiencies such as rickets, scurvy, and beriberi. Now, nutritional problems in America are driven by the discovery of strong links between nutrition and chronic diseases such as coronary heart disease, cancer, and stroke. Solutions now center on understanding consumer behavior and the factors influencing food choices. We emphasize the words "consumer" and "choice." Consumers make dietary decisions based on economic, physiologic, psychologic, sociologic, and even spiritual considerations. Eating in a developed country like the United States becomes a social, business, and family event, an act of pleasure, that goes far beyond the ingestion of the necessary nutrients to sustain life. People eat both for pleasure and as a biological necessity. This must be remembered if we are to understand the complex world of food choices, dietary quality, and dietary change.

Many forces, most outside the consumer's direct control, shape food demand and food consumption. In Senate testimony over 20 years ago, Dr. Winikoff of the Rockefeller Foundation said, "Nutrition is affected by governmental decisions in the area of agricultural policy, economic and tax policy, export and import policy, and involves questions of food production, transportation, processing, marketing, consumer choice, income and education, as well as food palatability and availability. Nutrition is the end result of pushes and pulls in many directions, a response to the multiple forces creating the national nutrition environment." This is just as true today as it was two decades ago.

Economics is just one of many complex forces shaping food choices, nutrient intake, and diet quality. Recognizing this, we thought that the Economic Research Service could facilitate and organize a distinguished team of multidisciplinary researchers to address what is known and not known about America's eating habits. Our colleagues in the nutrition, health, and diet arena help us understand the implications of food choices on health outcomes. Psychologists and other social scientists help us to understand how societal influences and

pressures as well as individual attitudes and habits shape what we eat. Last, the economist role is to help us understand why the allocation of scarce resources—such as time, information, and money—to competing ends has such a profound impact on food choices and, hence, diet quality.

Americans are slowly adopting more healthful diets—the share of calories from fat is declining, people are eating more fruit than 10 years ago, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Healthy Eating Index has shown some improvement in recent years. Countering these positive signs is evidence that more Americans than ever are overweight, fiber consumption is low, and snack foods are as popular as ever. Cheese consumption is at record levels thanks to our passion for cheeseburgers, pizza, and tacos. A heavier population means that people are not balancing energy intake with energy use—that is, Americans are eating more and exercising less.

Consumer knowledge about nutrition and health is improving, but slowly. Even dietitians, when asked to estimate the fat content of restaurant meals, were often off the mark. Over 200 dietary experts surmised that a hamburger and onion rings contained 863 calories and 44 grams of fat. In fact, the meal contained 1,550 calories and 101 grams of fat. A tuna salad containing 720 calories and 43 grams of fat was estimated to have 374 calories and 18 grams of fat.

Even when we understand basic nutrition and health principles, we often fail to follow through. The desire for high-fat and high-sodium foods often outweighs nutrition concerns. Many people cannot measure the nutritional quality of a meal—a problem compounded in our society by the increasing incidence of dining out, fast foods, home delivery, and pre-packaged meals. We may be aware of the nutrient content of a particular food, but lose track when foods and ingredients are combined in unknown portions. Also remember that consumers eat three meals a day, quench their thirst with carbonated beverages, and constantly nibble on snacks. Is it any wonder that by the end of the day few of us know how many calories we have ingested, let alone our fat intake?

Confounding everything is the fact that benefits of good nutrition are often not observed immediately or are elusive. There is no guarantee that a lifetime of healthy eating will result in reduced morbidity outcomes or increased longevity. Some may forestall practicing good

nutrition in the hope that medical science will find a substitute for that low-fat, high-fiber diet. In the short run, people may prefer convenience foods over more healthful alternatives because of demands on their time. In the long run, taste considerations may simply prevail. Similarly, the uncertain future benefits of better nutrition may outweigh the perceived potential benefits of healthy eating. Put differently, for many people, healthy eating is just not worth the effort and sacrifice. The latter may be a particularly difficult phenomenon to overcome since Americans seem to discount the future heavily. We need only to look at the nation's extraordinarily low savings rates or high credit card balances for evidence. Convincing people of the longrun benefits of good nutrition is clearly made more difficult if immediate gratification is given higher priority.

Changes in society continue to exert a tremendous influence on our dietary patterns. Food consumed away from home—which typically contains more fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol than meals prepared at home—is at an all-time high and growing. The explanations are familiar: more women in the labor force, more discretionary income, and smaller households. Clearly, counting grams of fat is more difficult for food purchased from the local hamburger joint, a sidewalk vendor, or the supermarket deli.

With a bewildering array of food items to select from, research indicates that the average consumer takes only 12 seconds to make a brand selection. Of course, Madison Avenue spends $11 billion in advertising to help us here. Not surprisingly, most of these advertising dollars promote prepared and convenience foods, snacks, and alcoholic beverages. By contrast, the Federal Government spends a mere $350 million annually to promote healthy eating.

The chapters in this volume are intended to help initiate and encourage a dialogue on nutrition in this country. This report is published under the auspices of the Economic Research Service, but its contributors come from many institutions and disciplines. Economists, dietitians, nutritionists, psychologists, and social scientists are represented. Our hope is that this effort will not only contribute to future U.S. nutrition and agriculture policy, but also provide lessons for developing countries throughout the world. As incomes and wealth increase, these countries are already struggling with many of the same nutrition issues discussed here even as they continue to face problems of undernutrition. Much work remains.