



UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
TWIN CITIES

Division of Epidemiology
School of Public Health
Stadium Gate 27
611 Beacon Street S.E.
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455

January 28, 1988

(612) 624-5400

Christopher Howson, Ph.D.
Project Director
National Academy of Science
Diet and Health Study
National Research Council
2101 Constitution Avenue
Washington, D.C. 20418

Sushma Palmer
Director Food & Nutrition Board
NAS/NRC
2101 Constitution Avenue
Washington, D.C. 20418

Dear Colleagues:

Congratulations on the very good meeting at San Francisco. I'm sure we all feel progress has been made. I don't have to tell you that the schedule of deadlines is ahead of the actual accomplishments in writing and editing. I keep thinking and proposing, weakly, some solutions. Clearly the central scientific editor-coordinators have got to put in the needed work before the March meeting. What I see as primary needs beyond that are a small group representing each of the major skills, nutrients and disease entities, meeting to consider the revisions made (between now and March) and to do some rewriting to be available for the March meeting at which you expect a document to be "acceptable". I propose such a working group because I really think that the quality of the syntheses differs considerably between sections.

Even more important than these major writing tasks still to be done are the following issues in my view:

We are very close in medical science to having summary reviews of broad areas unacceptable without meta-analysis. An intelligent critique is still essential and, of course, valuable. That's where we are. But an intelligent critique without an attempt at quantitative assessment of the combined evidence may no longer be acceptable. I would like to suggest earnestly that our report will be incomplete and not up to date if it contains only an intelligent critique in the area of blood lipids and atherosclerotic diseases without use of the meta-analysis available to us, or a new meta-analysis. I would like to suggest that our statements on total fat intake and 2 or maybe 3 types of cancers will not be up to date without such a meta-analysis. This is the minimum. We might need it for osteoporosis.

I would like to encourage the development of such a meta-analysis using a small hard-hitting group that would set the conditions (i.e. for selection of studies to go into a meta-analysis) and charge one person to do the analysis and one person to review it.

If you do not hear from Richard Peto on the material we've included in Chapter 7, I suggest that you try to call and get him over here with the documentary material required before we can use it. I think it would be good to consult with Larry, Geoff, Tony and Ken concerning whether Peto should be engaged for the meta-analysis on fat and cancer. I would like to propose an alternative expert in meta-analysis (who is not an expert in fat and cancer), Tom Louis, of Harvard, and new head of Biometry at Minnesota. He might be more acceptable, as he is well-known for his contribution to meta-analysis, and might be more acceptable to them than Peto.

Finally, from some experience in composing recommendations, I think that ours are still little above a primitive level for content and acceptability. One simply cannot pull things off the top of the head or even from the best evidence (such as 6% polyunsaturates and 10% saturated fats) or 4.5 grams of sodium chloride and 3 grams of potassium without the most agonizing appraisal and more effective explanation and justification than we have provided.

Group I recommended strongly in San Francisco that the feasibility of such a 6%-10% combination and 4.5% sodium chloride with 3 grams of elemental potassium (off the top of the head from Lot Page) be subjected to more careful scrutiny. What we accomplished in San Francisco was to agree that these were desirable criteria based on the evidence. That is a long way from deciding that we're all going to put our names behind these quantities. Without more discussion and, in fact, more information about how this goal could be accomplished, we will be uncomfortable.

I realize this sort of letter doesn't sit well coming from somebody who hasn't been right on target with his own production in the chapters. I also realize that none of these issues is far from or foreign to your minds. On the other hand, when I hear statements that the March document will be turned over to FNB and external reviewers, I am very concerned. I would rather that the criticisms and modifications come first from within our group rather than have us respond in a defensive posture to what I anticipate will be the responses from our reviewers, and long before these recommendations hit the public.

Finally, you should not misinterpret several reactions voiced in DeWitt Goodman's absence. They were not pique, though most of us have suffered from the style of DeWitt's editorial criticism (not content which is excellent). You have three very good editors in Group I, Bailar, Shekelle and probably myself. And you have the best editor of all in DeWitt Goodman. Chapter 7 and the summaries greatly need his editing now, and without further requests from us for new material or for rewriting.

I have yesterday forwarded you my suggestions for Chapter 27 on overall assessment and conclusions. Those suggestions have nothing to do with the general need I express ~~as needed~~ in this letter. Enclosed are suggested edits for Chapter 1, Executive Summary. They represent Group I pretty well but the recommendations might be read and collated with Shekelle and Page.

Regards,

Henry Blackburn
Henry Blackburn, M.D.
Professor and Director

/ma

bpc: J. Bailar
R. Shekelle