

Statement of Dr. G. Harvey Anderson
House Government Reform Committee hearing on obesity
June 3, 2004

Chairman Davis, Congressman Waxman and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for this opportunity for me to address you on the obesity epidemic.

We all agree that the increase in the prevalence of obesity in the past 25 to 30 years is both startling and alarming.

But what is its origin? That is the question for which we have not simple answer. Therefore, my message is that governments' role must be to keep a steady hand on the helm and stay the course until we have both evidence for and agreement on a solution.

Obesity arises from both environmental factors and genetic factors. It is agreed that the rapid increase in the prevalence of obesity is primarily environmental. Americans at all socioeconomic levels are getting fatter. Some have attributed this to the "toxic" environment of inexpensive readily available food, reduced activity, increased wealth, longevity, stress in the workplace, advertising, and mothers' diet, just to name a few of the potential factors. The point is, the origins of this obesity epidemic are not defined and are complex. How can we offer solutions when we do not have an answer?

In my opinion the role of government at the present time is to stay the established course of providing dietary guidance to the public and to avoid any dramatic changes in the current dietary guidelines and food guide.

Where is the evidence for change? Changes in dietary guidance must be based on what we describe in medicine as evidence-based decision-making. This is a systematic approach that categorizes the quality of evidence available. It does not give equal weighting to each piece of evidence, and does not arrive at simply a consensus solution. In other words, the loudest or

most articulate speaker does not sway the evidence and the final decision. Government should have as a policy assurance that the principle of evidence-based decision making is applied to all forms of dietary guidance.

I would also like to remind you that dietary guidance is for the maintenance of health and prevention of disease. Dietary guidelines are guidance statements for government policy and provide the basis for consumer messages. Food based guidance to the public is provided by both dietary guidelines and food guides (the Pyramid). If followed by the individual this guidance will lead to food choices providing nutrient adequate diets and reducing the risk of chronic disease. Modification of this general guidance is appropriate for subpopulations of different cultures or genetic makeup, as well as those who have developed markers of a disease process (e.g. elevated blood cholesterol).

There is nothing fundamentally wrong with current dietary guidance. The question is-why don't people follow our guidance and select healthier diets, eat less and exercise more? We do not have the answer, but it seems to me we need to make a greater effort to communicate our existing dietary guidance in more effective ways. Shifting dietary guidance without scientific evidence is irresponsible and will only add more confusion among the public.

As is evident from the presence of other speakers here you know that carbohydrate, the base of the pyramid' has been brought into question, so I will address this specific issue.

Many hypotheses have been advanced suggesting carbohydrates are the cause of obesity. One suggests that sugars and processed carbohydrates "bypass regulatory systems" thereby causing obesity. The evidence is to the contrary. My research shows that all sources of energy in the diet contribute to satiety. Carbohydrates, including sugars, are satiating. Carbohydrates are more satiating than fats and less so than proteins, although I must note that this ranking depends on quantity and source.

What is it in the environment that causes people to eat too much food and ignore basic physiological signals? Why don't people eat more fruits and vegetables and whole grain cereals as described in the base of the pyramid? Why don't they make the right choice?

Hypotheses on the role of the food supply in the obesity epidemic require testing and the application of evidence-based decision-making before we are in position to suggest food-base solutions that are effective. I am convinced that none will be effective unless we also tackle other environmental factors contributing to obesity, including the low level of activity associated with our current lifestyles. In the meantime, let us find ways to be more effective in empowering individuals to follow the current dietary guidance.

In closing, I would like to draw your attention to a recent publication on "Dietary Guidelines: Past Experiences and New Approaches" published in the Journal of the American Dietetic Association December 2003, Vol 103, pages S1-S59. It was my privilege to serve as co-organizer of the meeting and as co-editor of the publication. This international conference strongly advocated the application of an evidence-based approach to modification of food-based guidance for the public.

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