

2020 DGA Listening Session

My name is Susan Levin, and I am a registered dietitian who works for the nonprofit nutrition advocacy organization the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine as well as for the nonprofit primary care clinic the Barnard Medical Center, both located here in Washington, D.C.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I think we all appreciate the effort to have more transparency in the process that ultimately leads to such an important publication, the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*.

Of all the recommendations made in the two reports published by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, I am here to underscore the importance of “scientific rigor.” As aptly stated by Dr. Russell, the chair of the committee that wrote those reports, the *Dietary Guidelines* have “the promise to empower Americans to make informed decisions about what and how much they eat to improve health and reduce the risk of chronic disease.”

If we truly intend to empower Americans to take control of their own health, the *Guidelines* need to be as follows:

One: free of industry bias: meaning the Advisory Committee members themselves should be free of industry ties and, in turn, the Advisory Committee’s selection of research should be free of industry funding.

Two: clear in its language about what is NOT healthful.

Although the USDA and HHS have done a much better job in selecting its committee members in recent iterations, the most recent DGAC report showed how even one bias – a member with close ties to the egg industry – lead to misinformation that confused the media and the public and outraged health care advocates and scientists. I’m referring to the dangerous attempt to have dietary cholesterol declared a nutrient of no consequence, based on research almost entirely funded by the egg industry.

As to language, the DGAs are notoriously vague in telling the public what NOT to eat. The *Guidelines* safely promote the consumption of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains but use coded and confusing language about what not to consume.

The *Guidelines* say, to be exact,

- “Eat as little dietary cholesterol as possible.”
- “Reducing solid fats when making food choices is an important way to reduce saturated fats and excess calories.”
- “Intake of saturated fats should be limited to less than 10 percent of calories per day.”

Most people have no clue what any of these recommendations mean. Unless they are equipped (both with the time and the knowledge) to decode the accompanying charts and graphs and willing to flip to the glossary of terms, they will not realize that the *Guidelines* are dancing around the advice to consume fewer animal products. The *Guidelines* have been criticized for years for not being more direct in these recommendations, and as a consequence, have not empowered Americans to take control of their health in any meaningful way. I would argue they have, in fact, been a road block in Americans’ understanding of nutrition’s role in disease prevention and treatment. Consuming fruits, vegetables, and

whole grains is great advice, but it is not enough to overcome the damage done by a diet that is full of meat and dairy and other high-fat products.

With the state of health Americans find themselves in today, we as health care advocates and providers cannot afford to allow the *Guidelines* to continue to give precedence to industries' influence over consumers' health.

In summary, please ensure that the next iteration of the *Guidelines* are free of industry influence and can therefore, finally, provide CLEAR and direct advice that empowers Americans to live healthier lives.

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