

Chapter IV

CONGRESSIONAL OPTIONS



vitamins



fats



minerals



carbohydrates



proteins

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OTA found that three key issues underlie the basic finding that the Federal Government has failed to adjust the emphasis of its human nutrition research activities to meet the changing health problems of the American people. Alternative approaches of dealing with these issues have been explored. Congress can elect to maintain the status quo, with or without minor shifts, or choose among the strategies and options offered by OTA, the General Accounting Office (GAO), and the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP), (see chapter I li). Either alternative has economic, institutional, and health implications.

Option 1: Congress Could Choose To Maintain the Overall Status Quo

Maintaining the status quo could mean refraining from any action. In a broader sense, it also could involve minor improvements in the present system—without making substantial changes.

A. Congress could refrain from any action, awaiting the recommendations of the President's Reorganization Project.

In August of 1977, President Carter directed the Reorganization Project staff at the Office of Management and Budget to thoroughly review the organization and structure of Federal food and nutrition programs. Food and nutrition research is one of the seven major areas under review. A final report to the President, expected in January of 1979, will include recommendations that may significantly alter the organization, and thus the course, of nutrition research activities.

Since significant strides have been made in nutrition research, there is no reason to expect a decline in research productivity if current funding levels are maintained. However, since several important areas of nutrition research receive little support at present, progress in these areas would be slow. These areas include the role of nutrition in the prevention of disease, nutrition education, mon-

itoring nutrition status, and nutrition policy and management.

If Congress chooses to refrain from any action to await the recommendations of the President's Reorganization Project, no adverse effects would be expected.

B. Congress could amend the Food and Agriculture Act of 1977 to clarify the designation of lead agency for human nutrition research.

At the present time, the Department of Agriculture (USDA) interprets the Food and Agriculture Act of 1977 to mean that USDA is the lead agency for human nutrition research, an interpretation not shared by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW). If Congress intended USDA to have primary responsibility for this research area, the Act will require amendment.

C. Congress could develop nutrition research goals and priorities for HEW that complement the goals and priorities outlined for USDA in the Food and Agriculture Act of 1977.

The legislation contains strong language on the relationship of diet to many of the leading

causes of death in the United States, the importance of proper nutrition in disease prevention, and the need for more knowledge in several areas of nutrition research. The research priorities spelled out in the bill do not fully reflect these thoughts,

Since the legislation pertains almost exclusively to USDA, it lays out what could be considered a partial strategy to solve the problems of diet and chronic degenerative diseases.

Congress could develop legislation containing research goals and priorities for HEW that complement those already legislated for USDA. These goals and priorities could be based on either the GAO, OSTP, or OTA strategies,

D. Congress could enact legislation establishing a coordinating mechanism for Federal human nutrition research activities.

Numerous recommendations for coordinating Federal human nutrition research have been made since the 1969 White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health.

The fact that the issue remains alive indicates the need for improvement.

E. Congress could consider legislation to improve data storage and retrieval, and to link the systems currently in use.

Coordination of Federal nutrition activities extends beyond specific mechanisms for intra- and inter-agency coordination. It also includes information storage, retrieval, and integration. No uniform system presently exists among the various agencies involved in nutrition research. Computerized systems that permit information integration and retrieval need to be explored. At the very least, relevant branches of HEW and USDA should have a common indexing and data retrieval system for this type of information. Since federally supported research accounts for the major share of research in the nutrition and health maintenance areas, integration among these agencies is essential. Integration of nutrition research data is also desirable among the public, private, and voluntary sectors,

Option 2: Congress Could Choose To Pursue a Human Nutrition Research Strategy Different From That of the Status Quo

Since this assessment found that the present nutrition research establishment has failed to respond to the changing health needs of Americans, Congress could move to change the emphasis of federally funded nutrition research. Such change could be based on the strategies and options put forward by OSTP, GAO, and OTA (reviewed and analyzed, chapter III). If Congress decides to follow this path, more information is required on current expenditures and existing expertise. Based on the results of needed studies, Congress could then determine which strategies and options would be most productive.

A. Congress could request GAO to conduct an audit of Federal expenditures for human nutrition research,

To eliminate the present confusion over how much Government agencies are spending

on human nutrition research, Congress could ask the GAO to audit such Federal expenditures, using the definition of human nutrition research developed in this report. On completion of the audit, Congress would be in a better position to determine which areas of nutrition research are receiving inadequate support. At that point, Congress might consider reallocating some funds or appropriating additional funds to specific areas of nutrition research identified as poorly supported, or earmarking a percentage of Hatch funds for human nutrition research.

B. Congress could request the lead agency for human nutrition research to conduct a census of research personnel.

There is a clear need to establish how many scientists are both presently involved in and training for nutrition research. This cen-

sus would include a breakdown in terms of various research areas, such as Government facilities, universities, medical facilities, private institutes, and industry. This kind of census would identify where nutrition research personnel gaps exist and where greater support is necessary. To fill such gaps, expanded Federal support should be considered.

C. Congress could increase training grants and fellowships, and consider establishing midcareer training for scientists.

If a need is established for more research personnel, this could be met through a com-

bination of two routes: increasing training of young scientists and providing midcareer training for established scientists. By making fellowship and training grants available, candidates would be attracted to those fields in which more research is needed (particularly the newer fields), Congress might also consider alternative means to facilitate training such as loans, work/study funds, pay-back scholarships, and income tax rebates for students.

For established scientists wishing to broaden the scope of their research interests to encompass nutrition research priorities, midcareer training or continuing education could be considered.