

MYTH vs. FACT

*Confused about cholesterol, fat and red meat in your diet?
Diet-health experts clear up this issue with some good old fashioned advice —
balance and moderation.*

by Janet Mayer



The patient sat on the edge of the examination table swinging her legs. She was 48 years old, and felt in good health; so why this call-back just to get the results of a blood test taken during a routine physical 10 days before? Looking at her watch for at least the third time, she again contemplated the human anatomy charts on the walls.

Thoughts of leaving began to formulate in her mind when the doctor knocked on the door and entered. Hello, Karen, how are you today?" He barely waited for a reply, before continuing, "I got the results of your blood test back and everything looks good except for your cholesterol which is 241. That is bad! You are going to have to alter your diet to get it down. You'll have to quit eating red meat, eggs and fried foods. I'll have the nurse give you a diet to follow."

"I hardly ever eat eggs or fried foods," Karen protested. "We raise our own beef and pork, and it is lean. What fat there is, I trim before I cook it. I have always watched my diet; I just don't understand how this could happen. Maybe the test was wrong."

"I know you would like to believe that, but the tests are correct. It doesn't matter where the meat comes from; it is still bad for you," the doctor continued. "You will need to come back in three months for another blood test to see if there is a change." He picked up the chart and started to leave the room, but turned and added, "If I had my way, everyone would be on a vegetarian diet. Then we wouldn't face this problem."

This scenario actually happened. Why would a physician advise patients

to eliminate one of the basic food groups from their diet?

A war is being waged on fat and cholesterol. Red meat has been declared one of the main enemies. However, on the other side of the conflict are many others who are concerned about diets



Dr. Elliot Corday

that are not properly balanced because of dietary restriction of beef and other red meat, especially for children and the elderly.

Physicians Against Red Meat

According to the Associated Press, a group of Washington-based doctors and nutritionists, calling themselves The Physicians' Committee for Responsible Medicine, is urging the Agriculture Department to change its food groupings. The change of the 35-year-old standard four basic food groups—meat, dairy, grains, and fruits and vegetables -to a pyramid group with emphasis on grains, legumes,

vegetables and fruits was proposed. The organization feels meat and dairy products should be eliminated because Americans eat too many of these products.

Dr. Neal Barnard, president of the committee, says that today's typical Western diet is too high in animal fat, placing Americans at an increased risk of developing cancer, heart disease, obesity, diabetes and osteoporosis.

John Block, former Secretary of Agriculture and current president of the National-American Wholesale Grocers' Association, says this proposal to radically change the recommended four basic food groups "is the height of irresponsibility and would do a great disservice to millions of Americans." He maintains that meat and dairy products are important sources of protein, iron and calcium. People should be educated to eat all things in moderation rather than engage in some food fad-of-the-moment hysteria and renounce four decades of nutritional science.

"The idea that our official policy should be to propagandize against these foods, particularly in schools, is ludicrous," Block says.

Physicians for Red Meat

In complete agreement with Block is a physician who feels the whole cholesterol issue has been blown out of proportion. Dr. Elliot Corday, MD, a clinical cardiologist involved with research on the artificial heart at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, Los Angeles, Calif., maintains that even the strictest cholesterol-lowering diet seldom lowers the level of serum



cholesterol by more than 10 percent. Even if such strict dietary modifications were feasible and effective, they can deprive the body of essential micro-nutrients, especially in children and the elderly.

"I am a practicing cardiologist. I see this happening all the time. Aged patients come in telling me how terrible they feel. After testing I find they are anemic. I inquire into what their diet is, and many times I will find they aren't eating a balanced diet. They will say, 'Oh, doctor, my cholesterol level is 191 and I'm going to die. I can't eat red meat and eggs because these things are bad for me.' I tell them they have to eat a balanced diet with iron or they will not get better. I think they are afraid they are going to die on the spot if they put one thing containing cholesterol in their mouth. I, myself, believe red meat should be in everyone's diet.

"This Madison Avenue campaign to scare the public about cholesterol has worked. It is a pain to most physicians who have to work through patient's over-anxiety about their cholesterol. The end results of studies done on cholesterol show only about a 2 percent reduction in mortality; a large number of physicians aren't even convinced about the effects of cholesterol."

The Cholesterol Scare

According to Corday, the public's awareness of cholesterol began many years ago through widely read, unopposed news media campaigns launched by the American Heart Association. In 1983, the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, a major division of the federal government's National Institute of Health, conducted a poll revealing the fact that at least two-thirds of the public believed that a high-fat diet and dietary cholesterol had a large effect on coronary heart disease.

In planning their anti-cholesterol campaign, the Heart Institute found no resistance from the public, but they learned from a related poll that a large number of the nation's physicians disagreed. The nation's doctors became the main target of the Institute when the National Cholesterol Education Program was brought into existence.

The Heart Institute's advisory council was asked to approve the money for the program that would research how to influence physicians' views on cholesterol.

Leading dissent against the formation of the program, council member Dr. Corday maintained that the nation's physicians just weren't convinced about cholesterol. The



Sylvia Hill, registered dietitian, says it's a gross misconception to advise people to cut red meat totally from their diets.

program was rejected several times, but after additional time and debate the program was narrowly approved by the council. Its primary goal was to influence the physician community.

Late in 1987, every practicing doctor received a report summarizing the institute's findings on cholesterol. A more elaborate information kit on treatment was sent to a large group of physicians, including doctors in primary care, cardiologists, internists, family-practitioners and general practitioners.

In 1989, in an article titled "The Cholesterol Myth" published by the *Atlantic Monthly* magazine, investigative reporter Thomas J. Moore explained what happened in the Heart Institute's anti-cholesterol campaign. According to Moore, in 1988, after the formation of the National Cholesterol Education Program, the Heart Institute acquired powerful new allies. The American Medical Association (AMA), a major drug manufacturer and two huge food companies joined forces in the "war on cholesterol."

Moore wrote, "In announcing the

advertising campaign against cholesterol to the nation's physicians, AMA said, "The AMA's Campaign Against Cholesterol will use national and local television to tell the public about the risks of high blood cholesterol and the availability of cholesterol testing through your offices."

The slogan that emerged later—"Ask your doctor about cholesterol"—exploited the discovery that the public had been easier to convince of the dangers of cholesterol than were the doctors who dealt with heart disease every day.

Another eager new partner in promoting cholesterol consciousness was a drug company that was aggressively marketing a new cholesterol-lowering drug and was understandably excited that the government had created the largest new market in decades. The food companies were a cereal company promoting a new oat-bran cereal and another one promoting a cooking oil spray that contained no cholesterol.

The public relations and advertising campaign began to reach the public early in 1989 by means of special magazine features, cereal box advertisements, books, videocassettes, brochures, discount coupons and posters.

Moore said that this, in reality, was a business scheme to sell products and physicians' services instead of the public service campaign it appeared to be.

The overall consensus of Moore's 25-page article is, "Diet has hardly any effect on your cholesterol level; the drugs that can lower it often have serious or fatal side effects; and there is no evidence at all that lowering your cholesterol level will lengthen your life."

Actual Facts About Cholesterol

What is the actual impact on life expectancy of high or low cholesterol levels? According to a report published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* in 1987, a Harvard team of physicians and researchers led by William C. Taylor used the risk-factor equations from two studies done on cholesterol, the Framingham study and the Mr. FIT trial. They concluded that for persons without other risk factors, such as smoking, obesity or high blood



pressure, a lifelong program of cholesterol reduction would increase life expectancy only three days to three months.

Dr. Joseph J. Vitale, MD, Boston University School of Medicine, shares the same viewpoint. He says that many carefully designed and well-executed studies on lowering dietary cholesterol show that for the overwhelming majority of people, the effect of diet on the incidence of heart attacks is virtually zero.

"For those relatively rare people with extremely high cholesterol levels, a connection between blood levels of cholesterol and the risk of heart disease is clear," Dr. Vitale says. "What this connection means in terms of treating or preventing coronary heart disease in the general population, however, is not clear."

He points out that cholesterol is a natural product of the body, and this natural production of cholesterol is at least two to three times the amount of cholesterol taken into the body in food.

Dr. Corday says practitioners should advise the public to have their blood cholesterol checked only if there are sound clinical indications. Patients should be told to abstain from smoking and to follow a reasonable blood pressure control program. A mixed diet low in calories and saturated fat should be recommended along with some physical exercise.

"This safe and economic advice does not necessitate the presently advocated dramatic cholesterol campaign of uncertain value but tremendous cost," Dr. Corday says.

Defense of the Red Meat Industry

Being named one of the bad guys in the "war on cholesterol," the red meat industry has met the challenge. In 1984, at the height of the controversy over cholesterol, the board of directors of the National Live Stock and Meat Board adopted a statement of principles in dealing with diet-health issues. In part, it said, "We believe the attributes of red meat are compatible with the rising consumer interests in good health and weight control. We must carry our communications programs to explain these attributes."

Another part of the statement said, "Because of conflicting advice about diet and health, there is a risk of consumer confusion and uncertainty. We agree with the concept of the dietary guidelines recommending the avoidance of too much fat, sodium and sugar. We urge all involved in the development and dissemination of dietary information to proceed with caution, recognizing the consumer's growing skepticism with regard to dietary advice. We must recognize that when we give advice about what to eat or not to eat we are affecting both the quality of life and life itself"

Is the Defense Working?

How well have these principles been carried out? Sylvia Hill, a registered dietitian for 13 years, says she finds the educational efforts of the National Live Stock and Meat Board to be of great value in her job. Hill is employed at Lee Hospital in Johnstown, Pa., and is directly involved in advising patients on their diets. She feels that people should control their cholesterol by limiting intake of fats.

"I believe you can lower your cholesterol by diet; I have seen it happen too many times not to believe it," Hill says. She advises patients to limit their daily intake of red meat to five to six ounces cooked weight. The cuts she suggests are sirloin, round, tenderloin and flank. Ground meat is okay, but she tells patients to buy the reddest and the most expensive. "I limit my own consumption of red meat to the same list of cuts.

"I feel it is a gross misconception to advise people to cut red meat totally from their diets. Many health professions feel that a lot of the doctors are not adequately informed on nutrition to advise patients on diet. I would have to agree. For a group of physicians to be trying to exclude meat and dairy products from the basic food groups is ludicrous. These foods are very important in a balanced diet."

Information from the National Meat Board helps Hill in educating patients. Especially good are food presentations such as "A Change of Plate," an award-winning teaching kit that shows how to reduce the fat and calories in meat and

still enjoy its unique nutritional benefits. She finds the three-dimensional food models that are scaled to the recommended 3-ounce portion size, the flip chart and comprehensive leader's guide to be helpful.

Positive Action Taken

David Ivan, executive director of the Pennsylvania Beef Council, feels the beef industry has a much different product than it had five years ago. Retailers are trimming beef more closely and cattlemen are producing a leaner product. The result of this tandem effort is beef products that are lower in fat and cholesterol.

In addition to changing the products and working with dietitians, the Meat Board is making an effort to dispel dietary myths among future physicians. This organization will be sponsoring a medical school compendium and exhibiting at select medical meetings. Also on the drawing board is a series of continuing medical education dinner-meetings across the country that will stress "Practical Strategies for Dietary HyperCholesterolemia." The Meat Board recently developed a brochure entitled, "Sterling Advice," which is aimed at mature consumers and will be placed in primary-care physician offices nationwide.

Another new program is the HeartCare video education program, specifically designed for patients who have been diagnosed with high cholesterol levels. This four-part video has been placed in the offices of cardiologists nationwide. It walks patients through dietary and lifestyle changes they now face in their attempt to reduce their cholesterol levels by eating a balanced diet that includes red meat.

"Our philosophy is simple," explains Ivan. "We are going to show consumers and health professionals how our products 'fit' current dietary recommendations versus challenging or fighting those recommendations."