

Editorial

The New Debate In Nutrition

American nutritionists are enjoying an intense debate over the advice they should be giving the public. This came to a head last October when the Food and Nutrition Board (seven PhDs and eight MDs) refused to allow the most recent RDA committee (eight PhDs and two MDs) to release its report. This generated the current debate which has been aired in *The New York Times*, in *Science* and in the November/December issue of *Nutrition Today*. The Food and Nutrition Board stated the RDA Committee's report had failed to pass scientific review, while the RDA Committee accused the Board of objecting because it had lowered the RDA for Vitamin A and Vitamin C.

Elliot Marshall, *Science*, News and Comment section, 231.537-539, 1986, suggests there is a basic conflict between an activist group which maintains we can not wait for perfect proof but must act on the evidence we have today, and an entrenched traditionalist group which demands more proof. There is no problem for Orthomolecular physicians who would all be classed as activists. The activists involved in this debate are establishment scientists, mostly physicians, active in dealing with chronic diseases. We did not wait for perfect proof to label smoking hazardous, nor do we need perfect proof that lead in our gasoline is toxic. Nor are these activists particularly innovative or bold in their recommendations. They claim we should improve our diet by reducing fat and increasing fiber. They are prepared to move beyond minimal nutrient standards but not much, and still appear opposed to using large doses of vitamins. I would guess they have moved about one-tenth of the way from the traditionalists toward the Orthomolecular position.

Yet they are resisted stoutly by the traditionalists, of whom Victor Herbert is a leader. They demand even more proof — as do the tobacco industry and gas companies. These traditionalists have been the most aggressive critics of mega-vitamin therapy, using every means possible including misrepresentation, selective literature reviews and promulgation of

vitamin toxicities which do not exist.

The activists have arrived relatively late on the nutritional scene and are only now obtaining positions of power in the nutritional establishment. The traditionalists have been leaders for four decades. They are chiefly scientists who have never had to treat patients. Most are PhD biochemists or nutritionists. They have never been confronted with the health needs of sick people. To them the science of nutrition progresses very slowly, decade by decade, as the perfect proof gradually develops. They are concerned only about the 50 percent of the population who are well. The other 50 percent, the sick part, are of no interest to them. Physicians who treat sick people can not afford the luxury of waiting until the traditionalists have gained their perfect proof.

I suspect there is another, hidden, reason. The traditionalists are concerned because they sense they are losing the war. They are not too concerned about Orthomolecular medicine, although they could not ignore Linus Pauling and they have underestimated the enormous impact this has had on the public. But they did not expect to have to fight in their own journals against other establishment nutritionists.

A church is not worried over the defection of one person because it loses one member, but rather because this may lead to the defection of another and another. Heresy can not be tolerated. The traditionalists view the activists as heretics who are gaining positions of power within the nutritional establishment from which they will be displaced.

I suspect the activists are winning the war, and it's about time. It is twenty-nine years since the first niacin/schizophrenia report was published. It usually takes forty years for ideas to be accepted in medicine. Another eleven years should see Orthomolecular medicine the medicine practised by all physicians. It only took niacin thirty years to establish itself as the best broad-spectrum hypocholesterolemic agent. Vitamins are, in fact, becoming quite respectable.

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