Theses Abstracts

NEGOTIATING DIETARY KNOWLEDGE INSIDE AND OUTSIDE LABORATORIES: THE CHOLESTEROL CONTROVERSY

KARIN GARRETY

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For more than forty years, doctors and scientists have disagreed about the extent to which dietary saturated fat and high serum cholesterol levels contribute to the development of coronary heart disease (CHD), and whether or not the disease can be prevented by dietary change. Although large amounts of time, effort and money have been devoted to research, experiments have often yielded inconclusive and contradictory results.

This thesis analyses the development of knowledge and policies relating to dietary fat, cholesterol and CHD. It takes a symmetrical stance towards the knowledge claims under investigation. That is, it does not try to ascertain which particular version of the 'facts' is true, or to argue for or against the efficacy of dietary change. Instead it seeks to explicate the social context in which medical science and dietary policies developed. The central problem addressed by the study may be summed up as follows: How and why, in the midst of so much scientific uncertainty, did so many people come to believe that dietary change could prevent heart disease?

The study takes a historical perspective. It draws upon archival material from a variety of sources, including scientific articles, food advertisements, business journals, policy documents, newspapers, popular magazines and the internee. These sources indicate that the development of knowledge and policy relating to diet and CHD was a complex interactive process which cannot be divorced from the cultural, political and commercial contexts in which it occurred.

The putative links between diet and CHD were first popularised by entrepreneurial scientists in the affluent society of 1950s America, at a time when the 'facts' were meagre and tentative. These scientists were motivated by therapeutic activism, a drive to 'do something' despite incomplete knowledge. Advice to lower fat consumption struck a receptive chord among sectors of the lay public. Their interest in polyunsaturated fat and cholesterol was further stimulated by commercial interests, which used the new claims to sell products. Cholesterol-lowering diets soon became popular.

The first cautious endorsement of dietary change by an official medical organisation (the American Heart Association) appeared in 1960. It was provisional, subject to the attainment of the definitive proof. However, the changing social circumstances of the United States during subsequent decades favoured the retention and enhancement of policies advocating reductions in fat and cholesterol intakes. As scientists strove to provide 'true' proof, food activists, health policy-makers and advocates of 'healthy lifestyles' adopted and
promoted dietary change as a progressive cause. It provided a means of resisting the undesirable side-effects of affluence. Dietary self-denial and exercise, as preached by Nathan Pritikin and others, promised physical and almost spiritual renewal and salvation.

There were only two groups of people who questioned the wisdom of the dietary recommendations - scientists who insisted that policies be based on unequivocal evidence of efficacy, and those sectors of the food industry whose profits depended on the sale of products containing saturated fats and cholesterol. During the 1970s, these industries mounted a number of campaigns which highlighted the unstable and uncertain aspects of the scientific knowledge linking their products to disease.

Although they were able to recruit sceptical scientists as allies, their challenges were unsuccessful. They could not muster sufficient authority to overturn the claims of the many prestigious medical organisations which supported dietary change. Indeed, the sceptical scientists lost legitimacy because of their alliances with industry. Although the definitive proof remained elusive, policy statements in favour of dietary change accumulated. The scientific, government and medical organisations that issued these statements found it difficult to turn back. In the early 1980s, several large, expensive trials designed to test the effects of cholesterol-lowering regimes produced equivocal results. Scientists shaped these results into endorsements for dietary change and intensified their policies. A diverse range of people had already decided that dietary change was desirable and the scientific results were shaped to reinforce the policies which preceded them.

The study draws on a range of theoretical perspectives within the sociologies of science and medicine. The overall approach is constructivist in nature and makes use of actor-network theory, symbolic interactionism, the ideas of Michel Foucault, and recent work on lay understanding of scientific knowledge.

Karin Garretty
School of Science and Technology Studies
University of New South Wales
Sydney, NSW 2052 Australia

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