Commentary

Project M.O.M.: Mothers & Others & MyPyramid

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To some, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion (CNPP) is perhaps best known for its role in developing the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and the Food Guide Pyramid, now known as MyPyramid. The Center is leading the effort to establish the 2010 Dietary Guidelines, and it is the face of nutrition for the USDA, with 4.8 billion Web-hits to MyPyramid since its release in 2005. At present, it is helping America address issues of childhood obesity and poor nutrition.

NUTRITIONAL GATEKEEPERS AND LESSONS FROM HISTORY

Less than 70 years ago, American families faced a nutrition crisis. They had gone from depression breadlines to World War II ration books. Because so much meat was being sent overseas to feed troops and allies, there was concern regarding an impending protein-related nutrition crisis. Though it was believed that educating people about alternative forms of protein, such as organ meats, would help solve this problem, there was a limited budget to do so (1).

While this was not a calorie crisis, it was a nutrition crisis (2). With limited time and effort to spend on the home front, the US government’s newly formed Committee on Food Habits decided to focus their persuasion efforts on where they mattered most—on the Nutritional Gatekeeper, the person who purchased, grew, bartered, baked, and prepared the food for the family (3). In the war-driven year of 1943, that person was typically the mother of the household. By targeting messages, posters, and education efforts at this one target, the Committee intended to make a big impact by focusing on a small number of opinion leaders.

Sixty-five years later, Americans are in a different type of crisis. It involves an abundance of tasty food and too little physical activity. One key question is: How can the government regain the focus and resolve shown by the Committee on Food Habits? Part of this involves profiling the key nutritional gatekeepers. Today the nutritional gatekeeper may be a stay-at-home father, grandparent, housekeeper, caregiver, or older sibling. Yet despite a record level of women in the workforce and despite their record level of education, the responsibility of being a nutrition gatekeeper still disproportionately falls on mothers (4,5).

There are many potential courses of action to help improve child nutrition. As the Committee did in 1943, the USDA CNPP will be focusing its efforts at helping make it easier for these nutritional gatekeepers—regardless of their sex or age—to nutritionally feed the children in their families as well as possible and to set them on the path to a better nutritional future. The Center’s messages, education efforts, and new tools will be sharpened and focused on opinion-leading nutritional gatekeepers (6). This is “Project M.O.M.: Mothers & Others & MyPyramid” (Figure 1).

TOOLS TO EMPOWER THE NUTRITIONAL GATEKEEPER

In the first year after announcing Project M.O.M., CNPP will launch four tools to help nutritional gatekeepers. The tools have been designed to be useful to registered dietitians (RDs) and nutrition students as well as consumer science teachers and students in middle schools and high schools. Soon, these tools will also be available in Spanish.

MyPyramid Menu Planner

Although many people may be able to identify which of two foods is more healthful or even nutrient dense (an apple vs a cinnamon roll), the concept of a nutritious diet is more elusive (7). While many nutritional gatekeepers hope that they offer their family a nutritious diet, they are probably not very certain about it.

For nearly 3 years, CNPP has been developing the newly launched MyPyramid Menu Planner (MyPyramid.gov). It translates foods (even mixed foods, such as a club sandwich or pasta primavera) into food groups found in MyPyramid, and interactively notes how well the diet met MyPyramid recommendations on that day. Because it also asks for each family member’s age, sex, height, weight, and activity level, it can also estimate calorie requirements. Last, if there is an area in which one’s family continuously falls short—say fruit intake—the Menu Planner suggests easy changes one can try, and it can track dietary changes over a week.

The MyPyramid Menu Planner provides the opportunity to: 1) determine whether a person’s diet for up to 7 days meets MyPyramid recommendations, 2) determine small changes that would improve diet quality, and 3) understand whether the calorie level recorded would lead to weight gain or weight loss if consumed over a long period of time. In the future it may even offer a shopping list.
RDs often ask clients to keep a food record to help them become more aware of what they eat. The MyPyramid Menu Planner has a number of advantages over paper-and-pencil food records. It is easy and interactive, it does the necessary calculations, it shows a broad picture of diet quality in terms of food groups (not only calories or a few nutrients), and it gives real-time suggestions for improvement.

MyPyramid for Pregnant and Breastfeeding Moms

Regardless of how accomplished or educated a person she is, once a woman learns that she is pregnant, her interest in nutrition—not just calories—often reaches a new high. Whereas many physicians prescribe prenatal vitamins and periodically check weight gain, there may not be as much time for nutrition advice as needed. For some women, their understanding of nutrition may not improve much even after delivery.

MyPyramid for Pregnant and Breastfeeding Moms ("MyPyramid for Moms") gives these gatekeepers critical advice on what and how much to eat. In addition to having MyPyramid for Mom posters in physician offices and Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children clinics, new moms can also use the MyPyramid Menu Planner to guide them through the trimesters and through their breastfeeding months.

MyPyramid for Preschoolers

It is challenging for parents to know what to do when faced with eating jags, picky eaters, and conflicting advice from well-meaning relatives. MyPyramid for Preschoolers will be launched to help parents better understand food intake patterns and growth patterns and determine whether their preschooler is overweight or not. In addition, it will also help them set reasonable expectations for food-related behaviors and behavioral eating issues. This tool will be available on the CNPP Web site, and the related poster will also be found in the offices of pediatricians and family physicians.

The Cost of Raising a Child Calculator

Since 1960, the USDA has been providing estimates of how much it costs to raise a child from birth to 17 years of age. These estimates can be used to determine how much money should be allocated to ensure that a child is provided for.

This “Child Cost Calculator” will be an interactive tool that will let parents—or advising RDs or educators—estimate how much it will cost to raise a child by determining how much other families are spending on food and other necessities (including housing, clothing, transportation, education, and child care) by household income, number of children in the family, and region of the coun-
The power of this tool is in helping families manage their household budget in a way that ensures there is enough money for good nutrition as well as enough for the other necessities of life (Figure 2).

CONCLUSION

The Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion cannot solve the problems of childhood nutrition alone, but it can collaborate with those who can help turn the tide (8). Those collaborators include the members of the American Dietetic Association (ADA). Hardworking RDs may feel thinly stretched, might be overwhelmed by the pressures of a shrinking budget, might feel like they are endlessly fighting the discouragement of some of their clients, but down deep, they are believers. They are believers or they would not belong to ADA. They are believers, or they would not have opened this issue of the Journal. They are believers or they would not still be reading this Commentary. Frustrated as they might sometimes be, they are not resigned because they believe they are fighting an important fight.

New tools like the MyPyramid Menu Planner (MyPyramid.gov) are intended for overworked RDs and discouraged nutritional gatekeepers. MyPyramid for Moms is designed for expecting or new mothers.

MyPyramid for Preschoolers is directed toward the vexing problems of childhood eating patterns. The Cost of Raising a Child Calculator can guide the budget planning of a gatekeeper or it can be used by the gatekeeper’s advisor, counselor, or RD.

In addition to new tools, CNPP is ready to listen when a flashbulb of an idea goes off (support@cnpp.usda.gov). While the RDs of the ADA are one of the first lines of defense for nutritional gatekeepers, the CNPP will be there to give support in whatever is suggested and possible.

MyPyramid for Preschoolers

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- Should you feed a 4-year-old like a mini-adult, or what changes are needed?
- How do you know whether your child is eating a good diet?

The Cost of Raising a Child Calculator

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- How much money needs to be allocated each month to insure one’s children are fed a nutritious diet?

Figure 2. New education tools from the US Department of Agriculture’s Center for Nutritional Policy and Promotion. All tools will be available through the homepage MyPyramid.gov.

References