



The Politics of Fat: Food and Nutrition Policy in America, by Laura S Sims, 1998, 313 pages, hardcover, \$64.95. ME Sharpe, Inc, Armonk, NY.

This is an outstanding book that everyone in the nutrition profession should read. It is a timely, concise accounting of the political processes that led to our current food supply, and it suggests that changing the American diet to deal with obesity and related chronic diseases such as heart disease, diabetes, and aging will require retooling a developed bureaucracy and government-industrial complex. Sims points out that there was no conspiracy to change the food supply, but rather there was a well-intentioned effort launched in the 1930s and 1940s to ensure food security. In the 1950s, with the large-scale introduction of cooking oils into the American diet and the widespread availability of choice beef and whole milk, we were ingesting unprecedented amounts of fat.

Such a historical review would have been an interesting book in itself, but Sims goes beyond this to give the reader a primer on US government policy formation, with all its various players. Three case studies are discussed, including the history of the attempts to lower fat in the school lunch program, the lobbying efforts surrounding the US Department of Agriculture's food guide pyramid, the long effort to obtain approval for olestra, and the controversies over tropical as opposed to domestic oils.

Because each of us works toward healthier nutrition, the food supply is certainly one of the most powerful public health tools we have. Changing the food supply will mean working with all the constituencies involved in food policy. This book outlines some of the potentials for success as well as potential pitfalls in this process. Taken from another standpoint, the book shows that our food supply has changed. Remarkably, the food industry wants to give consumers healthier foods, but often gets a mixed message. Although the consumption of red meat, whole milk, and butter is going down, the consumption of cheese, premium ice cream, and high-fat pastries is rising. Clearly, consumers want good-tasting food that is also healthy. The government's policies have often ignored, lagged behind, or fought against both consumers and industry in this process.

Sims argues that, if we are to move ahead in reforming the way Americans eat, we must work with all of these elements in a constructive attempt to formulate rational food policy for the next century. This will involve making health-promoting choices easier and health-damaging choices more difficult. The details of Sims's proposals have been expanded in *Nutrition Today* (1998;33:134-43). Dietary fat is a symbol of public policy and politics, incorporating the areas of science, agriculture, health, economics, social psychology, and marketing. Governmental actions greatly affect its availability and consumption. No one is

better qualified to educate us than Sims, who has spent more than a decade researching national nutrition policy.

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The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Human Growth and Development, edited by SJ Ulijaszek, FE Johnston, and MA Preece, 1998, 497 pages, hardcover, \$95.00. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, United Kingdom.

In the past decade, new technologies have emerged that provided the means to examine patterns of human growth and development with ever greater precision and accuracy. The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Human Growth and Development provides an extensive overview of our current understanding of this remarkable process. In the introduction, the editors refer to the volume as a reference intended for health professionals, biologists, anthropologists, "educationists" and anyone interested in growth and development. Indeed, the book is truly an international reference containing the spectrum of theory and knowledge from the contributing authors, who span the globe. Generously illustrated (though some of the illustrations did not reproduce well), the information provided is accessible to both newcomers to the area and to seasoned anthropometrists. Clear and concise explanations about some of the latest technologies available for assessment are also included.

The book is divided into 13 sections covering a broad range of topics such as anthropometry, patterns of growth through the life cycle, behavioral and cognitive development, development of the immune system, skeletal and dental development, factors associated with growth, abnormal growth, and future research issues. The book opens with an interesting and well-illustrated history of the study of human growth. A nice addition is the biographical section in the back, which includes 24 brief biographies of the

prominent scientists in the area. These biographies include pioneering individuals from the early 1600s to the present day.

Prospective readers should understand that because this volume is an encyclopedia, there is insufficient space to provide in-depth information on any given topic. Little space is given to the discussion of controversies that may surround the selection of methods and reference data (or standards). Furthermore, articles are not referenced individually. However, an appendix is included with citations for further reading that is organized conveniently by topic. In addition, at the end of each chapter there are cross references to assist readers in search of related information within the volume.

Given that the intent of the editors was to provide a convenient resource for those interested in the extremely broad topic of human growth and development, the limitations of space and scope are easily overlooked. Anyone searching for a comprehensive review of our current knowledge in this rapidly growing field would find *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Human Growth and Development* to be well worth the purchase price.

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IARC Handbooks of Cancer Prevention, Volume 3: Vitamin A, by the International Agency for Research on Cancer, 1998, 261 pages, softcover, \$69.00. World Health Organization, International Agency for Research on Cancer, Lyon, France.

This handbook is a good summary of the role of vitamin A in cancer prevention. The book is well written and the content of the 10 separate sections is useful. The authors are recognized as

major researchers in the field of vitamin A metabolism and cancer prevention. The first section provides the essence of needed chemical information on retinol, retinyl acetate, retinyl palmitate, retinaldehyde, and retinoic acid and their commercial sources. The second section provides a brief overview of the natural occurrence, production, use, and analyses of these compounds. Some information on stable-isotope analysis should have been included, even though this method is not widely available and is quite costly. A third section emphasizes metabolism kinetics and tissue distribution of vitamin A. This chapter is very complete and up-to-date, and should be useful for researchers, health care workers, and graduate students.

However, because the book is about vitamin A and cancer prevention, it would have been useful to include some discussion on how risk factors for cancer, such as chronic infection, malnutrition, alcohol consumption, and cigarette smoking interfere with vitamin A metabolism. A fourth section summarizes preventive effects of vitamin A in both humans and experimental models, as well as possible mechanisms of chemoprevention. A series of tables are provided that summarize the experimental studies of vitamin A in cancer. The discussion of mechanisms of chemoprevention falls short on recent advances in molecular mechanisms. Section 5 of the book provides a brief overview of other beneficial effects of vitamin A, such as on vision and infection, whereas sections 6 and 7 detail vitamin A carcinogenicity, toxicity, and teratogenesis. The final sections offer a summary of the data as well as recommendations for future research.

This handbook serves as an important source of information on vitamin A and cancer prevention, and most workers in this field would benefit by owning a copy. In addition, the book provides useful teaching material for the classroom.

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