

Weight gains in pregnancy: Care with diet still required

In January 1968 at a San Francisco nutrition conference, obstetrician Howard Jacobson (then of the University of California and now of Harvard) realized that his peers and the news media were finally listening to his longstanding yet unconventional plea for a higher weight gain during pregnancy. Then in July 1970 Jacobson, along with the other members of the National Research Council's Committee on Maternal Nutrition, warned that the common medical practice of restricting pregnant women to a 10- to 14-pound gain may have been contributing to the high infant mortality rate in the United States (SN: 8/1/70, p. 95). Researchers previously thought that excess weight gain led to development of toxemia, a metabolic disorder marked by swelling and high blood pressure.

There is no evidence that holding weight down prevents toxemia, the panel reported, and there is evidence that low maternal gain is linked with low birth weight. Largely because of this panel's report, obstetricians have been slowly reversing their counsel to expectant mothers. There is no question that the trend is an upward weight gain—toward 20, 24, even 30 pounds.

However this greater weight allowance means more, not less attention to diet, Jacobson stressed in a talk before the American Dietetic Association in Philadelphia last week. The added weight must be properly distributed among fetus, placenta, amniotic fluid, uterus, breast tissue, maternal blood and interstitial tissue and not allowed to accumulate in fat or edema fluid. Jacobson advised that obstetricians and maternity clinic dieticians be guided by the NRC's Recommended Dietary Allowances for pregnant women but keep in mind that both working women and active housewives will need more calories than the Recommended Dietary Allowances permit.

How nutritional guidance coupled with food supplements influences the course of pregnancy has been examined in several cities in the United States, Canada, Guatemala and Taiwan. The studies have just been completed or are nearing completion, and the results will be scrutinized at Committee on Maternal Nutrition workshops next month, which Jacobson will head. The results, he anticipates, will help the committee define principles for dietary supplements for pregnant women. Establishing such principles, he believes, will be another step forward in helping women achieve optimal weight gain and nutritional distribution during pregnancy. □

Fast breeder moving fast despite the critics

The Scientists' Institute for Public Information last week called an Atomic Energy Commission report on the liquid metal fast breeder reactor (LMFBR) "superficial, misleading and extremely inadequate."

SIPI in an earlier action had filed suit against the AEC demanding the agency release its environmental impact report on the LMFBR. Then in August, the AEC insisted that a July 12 draft of an impact statement on a LMFBR demonstration plant constituted the statement demanded by SIPI and that there was no longer any controversy. Not so, claims SIPI in its latest statement. The July 12 report deals only with the single plant, not the total program, claims the public interest group.

In addition, SIPI spokesmen say the July 12 statement deals only cursorily with urgent matters such as the possibility of plutonium from reactors reaching a critical mass and exploding and of the extent of thermal pollution from the LMFBR power plants.

SIPI now says it wants the AEC impact statement to include consideration of not only the LMFBR reactor but also alternatives to it.

But despite SIPI's lawsuit, the Government appears to be going along full steam in getting the demonstration plant built, and it may even be expanding the \$2.5 billion program—which the AEC says will solve the nation's energy crisis.

For instance, Milton Shaw, the AEC's reactor R&D chief, told a recent conference that the AEC has "a firm basis for our expectation that the U.S. will enter a definitive cooperative arrangement for the first LMFBR demonstration plant by the end of this year."

And President Nixon in a speech last month in Hanford, Wash., a long-time AEC research center, announced that the Government now is contemplating yet a second LMFBR demonstration plant.

Whatever the merits of SIPI's case, its action points up a problem of growing urgency: The nation must somehow find a way objectively to weigh the technological alternatives for meeting its various needs and then choose the most rational course. Critics say it is questionable to have a narrow-purpose agency such as AEC making the choices almost unilaterally.

Whether or not the LMFBR is really the best choice for meeting expanding energy needs is perhaps not a matter the AEC should be expected to discuss objectively in its environmental impact statement. But if such a study is to be made at all—perhaps by some independent body—the time appears to be short. □

Fire protection for nursing homes

Congressmen have been receiving complaints that automatic sprinklers required for Medicare- and Medicaid-approved hospitals and nursing homes are not only prohibitively expensive but also not even capable of saving lives during fires, according to testimony at Senate hearing last week into the role of scientific advisory committees to the Government.

The problem with the sprinkler systems is that it is difficult to find an optimum way to trigger them, says the Southwestern Research Institute of Des Moines. For instance, a temperature that triggers the sprinklers in a hospital room is sometimes too high for patient safety; but, on the other hand, sprinklers wired to go off in all rooms of a hospital when an alarm sounds have sometimes drenched surgery patients in the operating room unnecessarily and with great danger to them.

Hospitals and nursing homes in Montana were close to shutting down, due in large part to the financial burden of installing automatic sprinklers, until Sens. Lee Metcalf and Mike Mansfield (D-Mont.) helped them find alternatives without violating the cumbersome National Fire

Protection Association Code.

More disturbing, there is a method of fire detection and prevention which is both more effective in saving lives and considerably cheaper than sprinklers, the SRI found. These are smoke-sensing devices. Apparently smoke sensors were preempted by sprinklers because the advisory committee that originally helped shape the NFPA code included representatives from the sprinkler industry but not from the smoke-sensing industry. As pointed out at the Oct. 8 hearings, the problem calls into question the role of scientific advisory committees to the Government and what role the Government itself should play in setting the regulations. Metcalf asked: Why didn't the Department of Health, Education and Welfare run its own sprinkler tests or have the National Bureau of Standards do so?

Both he and Mansfield had asked the same question of HEW several months ago. Whether HEW will buy the idea remains to be seen, particularly as the Bureau is currently undergoing a Congressional review of its organization and purpose (SN: 10/2/71, p. 225).