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## **Government Tackles Obesity, Part 2**

By Pat French

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The first of these two articles discussed the new Dietary Guidelines put forth by the Federal government. Among other reasons, these guidelines are needed to reduce the \$200 billion that diet-related disorders cost us each year. The government also is interested in spending its money wisely and protecting consumers when it comes to another way to improve health—weight loss. The DCRI even might be able to help in their efforts.

The first article gave some statistics about the growing problem of obesity in the U.S. Reducing diets obviously are one way to address this problem. But are high-protein, low-carbohydrate diets the way to lose weight safely and effectively? What about low-protein, high-carbohydrate diets? Very-low-fat ones? Vegetarian?

The fact is that only a few trials have compared different diets, outside of studies that have looked at specific endpoints, such as the effect of a low-fat diet on cholesterol, or specific diets for certain conditions, such as low-salt diets for people with high blood pressure. No trial has taken a "big-picture" approach to reducing diets. Until now.

The "Great Nutrition Debate," held in Washington, DC in February, was a lively discussion of the controversies surrounding reducing diets. The U.S. Department of Agriculture sponsored the debate, which included Dr. Robert Atkins sparring with Dr. Dean Ornish about the merits of a high-protein, low-carbohydrate diet versus a low-fat, vegetarian diet; a heart-surgeon-turned author who believes that the answer lies in cutting sugar and complex carbohydrates; an insulin-control guru; and an advocate of an Asian, rice-based diet. The experts did agree that Americans are too fat, even though they did not agree on the best approach.

Then in April, Dr. George L. Blackburn, a nutritionist at Harvard, wrote the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases to request that the government compare diet plans. He said that many reducing diets have not been shown to be effective in the long run and that they are not based on scientific testing. Blackburn, who also wrote to Congress about this, was joined in the letter by Drs. Ornish and Atkins; Dr. Sam Andrews, author of *Sugar Busters*; Dr. David Heber of *The Revolution Diet*; Rachael and Richard Heller, who wrote *The Carbohydrate Addict's LifeSpan Program*; and Barry Sears, who wrote *The Zone*.

Enter the Federal government. On May 30, at the National Nutrition Summit, USDA Secretary Dan Glickman announced that the government has decided to test two very popular diets—low-carbohydrate versus low-fat—to see which is more effective and safe for weight loss. The effects of these Atkins and Ornish diet variants on other health measures, such as kidney function and bone density, also will be measured in this \$20 million project.

The studies will be directed by the USDA's nutrition research center, headquartered at the University of California at Davis. A panel of scientists will be developing the protocols later this year, and the USDA's Agricultural Research Service Program on Human Nutrition will conduct the study at its 9 centers.

So where might the DCRI come in? Well, we may have the opportunity in the future to work on a trial of yet another way to lose weight—drugs. One of the DCRI's "twinkles," or projects on the horizon, involves the use of a weight-loss medication. This would be yet another new research area for the DCRI, and one that has important public-health implications. Good timing.

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