

News from Senator

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STATEMENT OF SENATOR BOB DOLE

NUTRITION SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING

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The evidence confronts us everywhere--at the grocery store, at the theater, in the Senate galleries, and on the sidewalks. Everywhere there is clear evidence that the federal budget is not the only creature which is gaining weight. Millions of Americans have health problems which are directly related to obesity. Just as I argue the case for a balanced federal budget, so I argue the need for Americans to recognize the urgency of balancing their caloric intake and energy expenditure.

Clearly, the government cannot dictate to its citizens what types of food they can put into their mouths. However, because of the scope of our government's health care program, we often end up paying the bill for health problems related to obesity. Because heart disease is the foremost public health enemy, and because more and more evidence points to the influence which nutrition has on heart disease, it is appropriate for the Nutrition Subcommittee to focus on this relationship. Over two years ago, the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs focused on this topic as part of our Hearings on Diet and Disease. Today's hearing gives us the opportunity to see whether or not trends noted at that time have continued, whether or not more has been learned about the overall topic and ways by which to address the problem.

It is a rather delicate issue, for while the direct and indirect cost of heart disease is estimated to be \$50 billion in 1979, Americans resent the intrusion of government in more and more segments of their lives. The question gets to be how to encourage healthy habits. How can private industry and consumer activists work to promote better nutrition? What role, if any, does the federal government have in this area?

Perhaps progress has been made in the area of citizens awareness. A recent survey on health habits in America reflects that most American families believe in the concept of preventive health. However, most admit that they do not practice preventive health. The study, which was done by Yankelovich, Skelly and White, Inc., reports that while obesity is regarded as a major health problem, one out of every three families has a person who is overweight. Further, parents who smoke feel they should stop to set a good example for their children. Only 16% actually do so. The benefit of regular exercise is undisputed, yet only one in three adults partakes in regular exercise. There is more good news--67% of those surveyed do not recognize alcoholism as a health problem; 75% feel that if nothing bothers them, they are in good health, even without a checkup; and 76% are confused about the government health warnings.

The survey is not entirely negative, for it does say that 25% of American families claim to be eating more nutritiously and that 26% are watching their calories more closely than they did a year ago. Many persons apparently feel somewhat knowledgeable on health and nutrition, although those receiving the highest scores tend to be middle and upper income women living in small communities. I believe that the public is receptive to helpful, straightforward information about health but that as of late they have been bombarded with so many new and different health theories that they have grown a little weary. I believe that it is one of the responsibilities of this committee to sort out facts from philosophy. I hope that today's hearing will take us closer towards that end.