

Resisting influence from agri-food industries on Canada's new food guide

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After two years of exhaustive public and professional consultation, discussion forums and focus groups, Health Canada's policy underpinning the new Canadian food guide has been drafted and is now undergoing final review. This dietary guidance policy¹ emphasizes a regular diet of "vegetables, fruit, whole grains and protein-rich foods — especially plant-based sources of protein," and explicitly warns against processed foods high in sodium, sugar and saturated fat. It also recognizes new food concerns, including environmental sustainability and food literacy and skills. The preliminary recommendations encourage eating less meat and replacing foods that are high in saturated fat (cream, high-fat cheeses, butter) with foods that contain mostly unsaturated fat (nuts, seeds and avocados).

These recommendations are evidence-based and sensible. The American Dietetic Association summarized evidence that shows that predominantly plant-based diets reduce the risk of many lifestyle diseases, including cardiovascular disease, diabetes and obesity, as well as certain types of cancer.² Furthermore, strong evidence speaks to the health benefits of lowering the intake of high levels of sodium and excess calories as sugars and for the replacement of saturated fat with unsaturated fat.³ Laudably, Health Canada has maintained transparency and a commitment to sound science through the development process for the new food guide. Now, it needs to carry these principles to the final report. However, there is concern that industry interests may interfere at the final hurdle. It is important to resist these influences.

In March 2016, the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology proposed guidelines for a new 2018 *Canada's Food Guide* and advised that the minister of health immediately undertake a complete revision of the guide so that it would better reflect the current state of scientific evidence.³ The committee wanted the revised food guide to be evidence-based; to apply meal-based rather than nutrient-based principles; to describe effectively and prominently the benefits of fresh, whole foods compared with refined grains, ready-to-eat meals and processed foods; and to make strong statements about restricting consumption of highly processed foods. It also advised that Health Canada convene an advisory body composed of experts in relevant areas of study, but not including representatives of the food or agriculture industries. Officials from Health Canada's Office of Nutrition Policy and Promotion almost immediately began work and promised a rigorous scientific review with public and professional consultation only, and stated their intention to keep the new guide free from industry conflict of interest.⁴

However, now that these new recommendations have been drafted, the Canadian Meat Council and the Dairy Farmers of Canada have expressed concerns to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health and are hoping for revisions.⁵ The submission from the Canadian dairy industry suggests that the group is worried about losing its special

KEY POINTS

- Health Canada promised that its new food guide would be developed based on scientific merit, transparently and with decisions made at arm's length from industry.
- A more plant-based, less highly processed dietary approach is being advised that takes into account environmental concerns.
- The draft guide is being reviewed, and agri-food industries have expressed concerns regarding some recommendations, hoping for changes in the final document.
- Health care providers should support Health Canada's efforts to produce a food guide that is free of industry influence and bias.

category status. The submission from the meat industry disagrees with the recommendation that Canadians should consume less red meat and eat more plant-based proteins.⁵ A report published in December 2017 by the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food recommended that "the new food guide be informed by the food policy ... and that the Government work with the agriculture and agri-food sector to ensure alignment and competitiveness for domestic industries."⁶

The Canadian meat industry is the largest component of Canada's food-processing sector (more than \$28 billion in registered annual sales and \$5.6 billion in exports) and therefore influential.⁷ However, dietary guidelines will not be credible if they are developed with conflict of interest with respect to short-term economic outcomes.

A similar scenario where industry reviews and provides input has already played out in the United States. In 2015, the US Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee recommended a reduction of red meat, a vegetarian diet as one of three dietary patterns and stressed environmental concerns.⁸ The US congressional committee responsible for oversight subsequently changed the wording of the statement on red meat consumption to encourage the eating of lean meat⁹ and dismissed environmental concerns as having no place in dietary guidelines.¹⁰ Widespread dissatisfaction at these and other changes resulted in the US National Academies being asked to conduct a comprehensive review of the process for developing the US Dietary Guidelines, and, ultimately, in their recommendation that future guidelines both strengthen scientific rigor and increase transparency.¹⁰ Canadians should learn from the US experience.

Health must come before short-term profit. Yes, there is a real potential that the proposals of the new Canadian food guide will affect the income of some farmers and industries. Over the long term, producers will need to adapt as consumers change their buying preferences. Farming will change, and change will bring new opportunities. The

Canadian government can encourage this transition and help affected industries by redirecting subsidies to farmers and manufacturers who avail themselves of these new opportunities.

Canada is already one of the world's largest suppliers of pulses, which include beans, peas, lentils and chickpeas. A Saskatchewan-based company is one of the world's largest manufacturers of organically grown pea protein, and Canadian plant food-manufacturing companies are expanding their markets internationally.¹¹ Canadian supermarkets are already increasing plant-based foods on their shelves.

Worldwide, changes in dietary policies are occurring. The US now recommends a vegetarian diet as one of their three dietary patterns,⁹ and China is advising its citizens to halve meat intake.¹² A shift toward more plant-based diets to promote population health, a more sustainable environment and improved animal welfare, is underway. Canada's new dietary guidance policy is well aligned with these changing world food opinions. The Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food should be helping farmers and manufacturers to adapt so that Canada remains a leading producer of healthy, affordable and sustainable foods. As health care providers, we should applaud Health Canada's evidence-based approach in drafting a new national food guide. In addition, we should support their efforts to avoid any undue influence from industry in developing the final policy.

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