

ASN Advisory Committee on Ensuring Trust in Nutrition Science
MEETING NOTES
Monday, April 25, 2016

Bert Garza, *Chair*
Carol Tucker-Foreman
Catherine Woteki
Michael McGinnis
Eric Campbell
Robert Steinbrook
Sylvia Rowe
Ed Cooney
Patrick Stover, *ex officio*
John Courtney, *ex officio*
Sarah Ohlhorst, *staff*
Megan Messina, *staff*

Absent: Vinita Bali; Catherine Bertini

Speakers: Marion Nestle; Eric Hentges; Michael Lauer; Hugh Webster

Chair Bert Garza welcomed the committee with a broad overview of the Committee's important charge. He noted the silo approach that has been taken with the various factors likely to influence trust in science generally and in nutrition science specifically noting that conflict of interest issues generally have attracted the most attention. He expressed the goal of the committee's work covering a much broader spectrum –i.e., covering Public Benefit; Scientific Rigor and Reproducibility; Transparency, Objectivity, and Equity; Truthful, Understandable Communication; and Accountability. This is a much broader agenda than current documents address. The Committee's task is significant with an optimistic timeframe and many daunting schedules to contend with. Yet more challenging is the hope that the Advisory Committee's report and the best practices it identifies will transcend nutrition science and be applicable to other fields and all "big tent" organizations that work with multiple players.

Garza then reviewed the parameters of the Committee's work – which includes a white paper that provides a critical analysis of best practices for broad-based organizations like ASN, where public trust is essential; the Committee may choose to undertake case studies that compare selected ASN practices with the Committee's observations. ASN would undertake a more comprehensive comparison with its Board of Directors. There was also discussion of the responsibility ASN has in holding itself, its members and even other organizations and entities in nutrition to the highest standards. The committee may divide into smaller subgroups in order to deal with each of the "domains" listed above. Committee members were asked if any "domains" are missing or irrelevant. It was noted that continuous monitoring and evaluation would be key components of the Committee report's implementation, with internal and external audits suggested. The membership of ASN should be made fully aware of all implementation steps and actions taken in response to the best practices report.

The meeting featured various speakers to inform the Committee's work: Dr. Marion Nestle, New York University, was invited to speak on "Bias Associated with Sources of Funding"; Dr. Eric Hentges, International Life Sciences Institute North America, spoke on "Exploring Progress and Shortfalls on Ensuring Public Trust in Nutrition Science"; Dr. John Courtney, ASN Executive Officer, shared an "Introduction to ASN" and touched on "What is Needed to Implement and Operationalize Best Practices?"; Dr. Michael Lauer, National Institutes of Health Office of Extramural Research, discussed "Rigor and Reproducibility", and Hugh Webster, Webster, Chamberlain, & Bean, provided a description of the legal definitions of public benefit and conflict of interest. The speakers suggested a number of resources which will be shared with Committee members for their review and consideration. There was substantial discussion by the Committee following each presentation.

Dr. Nestle's presentation focused on food industry funding of ASN and other nutrition organizations. She questioned whether benefits of industry financial support outweigh risks, documented and potential. She shared that, in her opinion, industry funding gives ASN activities the appearance of conflict and that disclosure is never enough; conflict of interest (COI) statements are insufficiently protective. Dr. Nestle asked that ASN's activities always be in the best interest of public health and the Society. Dr. Nestle mentioned a number of ASN activities that she feels should be focused on for improvements. In particular: satellite sessions, scientific statements, Sustaining Partners program, advocacy, and editorial boards. [Dr. Courtney clarified that ASN stopped producing scientific statements in 2015.] ASN members are concerned and care deeply about these things. Dr. Nestle noted that the World Health Organization no longer accepts industry funding. Dr. Nestle believes that ASN can be the credible voice within nutrition and health, but that current practices in her view dilute its integrity.

Dr. Hentges started his presentation by pointing out that scientists ask "Can we do this?", while consumers ask "Should we do this?" Therein lies a fundamental reason for public mistrust of nutrition science. Shared values are 3-5 times more influential to consumers than facts. Dr. Hentges shared examples of authentic trust and public-private partnerships. In the discussion following his presentation, it was noted that the structure of the food industry has changed dramatically in the past few years. Numerous mergers and acquisitions have changed the industry and food companies no longer have in-house basic research – only Nestlé and Unilever still do. Research has been turned over to marketing teams. It was also noted that while medical and nutrition research are very similar, with the same biases, there are significant differences in how technology is applied.

Dr. Courtney's intro to ASN covered ASN and the ASN Foundation 2016 financials including sources of revenue, ASN and ASN Foundation leadership, the Sustaining Partner program, scientific statements, membership, communications including audiences, satellite sessions, Board and speaker disclosures, and more.

Dr. Lauer shared that peer reviewed publications brought to the attention of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) that "bad science" was being funded by the NIH – science that lacked rigor and was not reproducible. He explained that a published article alerted the NIH that more than half of its funded clinical trials were not published within 2 ½ years of completion. NIH recently implemented steps to improve the scientific rigor and reproducibility of NIH-supported

work. NIH undertakes more detailed assessments of submitted proposals' scientific premises, rigor of design, inclusion of important variables such as sex, and authentication of resources in grant applications. Next year, NIH will institute a policy to require the results of NIH-funded clinical trials to be published and university published rates may begin to factor into grant funding decisions. He stressed that more than the NIH's renewed commitment is needed to correct such significant issues – adding that everyone is needed at the table, including all federal agencies, professional societies, universities, and other stakeholders. Data sharing is also a critical part of improving reproducibility and rigor.

ASN counsel Hugh Webster stressed that definitions could be found for both public benefit and conflict of interest, and that it was more the application of each term that presented key hurdles; specific implementation practices could fall anywhere from simple to complex. With nutrition, any kind of published research imparts nutrition knowledge and could be considered a public benefit. COI is most often addressed as a direct financial relationship where there is the potential for bias in favor of a third party funder. It is often a question of where the primary benefit lies – to public health or to a commercial entity? - and who is setting the research agenda?

A conversation ensued regarding ASN's Board of Director COI disclosures – how detailed these documents are and how closely, along with how often, they are monitored. Who holds the decision making power to decide who can serve on the Board or must rescues themselves from votes, etc.? The Committee noted that COI is not just about money, but also can reflect other biases Board members hold.

The Committee considered how to tackle their charge to develop a best practices document and to initiate the process of mapping ASN activities against this thought piece. It was felt that the Committee must better understand which “domains” have authoritative documents reviewing evidence of related best practices and which have gaps in the research base. The Committee could then focus on areas that are lacking in an evidence base.

The projected report outline would start with a statement of the problem: *the need to ensure trust in nutrition science*, and then cover the landscape that ASN is currently operating in. Committee members agreed with the infographic that was presented detailing the various “domains” the committee would examine and requested that the various players or actors pertinent to each within ASN and nutrition science be included. The Committee felt it would be most effective to address each domain by examining ASN characteristics and activities that fit each domain. The Committee also recommended that its report reflect an intended application to a broad audience and that a second report to the ASN Board of Directors focus more specifically on ASN practices. The Committee discussed three ways to examine ASN practices relevant to each domain:

- 1) Activity/relationship is not good by any means and should not be done;
- 2) Activity/ relationship needs to be managed; and,
- 3) Activity/ relationship is not a concern.

ASN activities and relationships will be covered in a generic way to create a report detailing best practices that can be applied to the broad field of nutrition science. Activities to be examined were organized in the following way:

- 1) Membership (recruitment and retention);
- 2) Research funding;
- 3) Oversight of research conduct;
- 4) Interpretation of research findings;
- 5) Publication of research findings;
- 6) Translation of research findings (messaging, communications);
- 7) Application of research findings; and,
- 8) Advocacy to advance the field.

The report is expected to focus on strategies to build trust in these areas and focus on best practices for public benefit, rigor, transparency, communication, and accountability. The committee felt 1-2 case studies or possibly more would be effective to help communicate the characteristics of best practices. See the attached draft report outline for more information.

Nest steps include identifying or conducting literature reviews to determine the evidence base and best practices for each of the domains, identifying which domains need more work, identifying possible case studies, and applying best practices against activities and relationships to selected present activities. It is thought that the report could be a 20-page document.

The meeting adjourned at 4:00pm.