Excerpts from Helfand’s Review of Teicholz’s article:
“The Scientific Report Guiding the US Dietary Guidelines: is it scientific?”
The BMJ

“Major deficiencies” in Teicholz article

It is entirely legitimate to raise and debate the overarching, central claim that the DGAC did not review the science impartially and consequently drew the wrong conclusions from it. In raising the question of bias, it is also reasonable to contrast the panel’s endorsement of a vegetarian diet despite weak evidence with its strong stand against saturated fats despite conflicting evidence. Previous versions of the Dietary Guidelines have been criticized for relying too heavily on observational studies and on expert consensus. The DGAC’s conclusions are largely unchanged from the previous Dietary Guidelines, raising the question of whether their modified process has the same problems.

In the specifics of these arguments, however, the Teicholz article has major deficiencies. In particular, Teicholz’s argument that the panel did not follow its own processes seems contrived and superficial. Transcripts from its public meetings indicate clearly that they defined, in advance, the types of evidence, including external systematic reviews, that would be used. In general, the use of external systematic reviews is consonant with current standards for conducting systematic reviews and guidelines, which emphasize the need to avoid duplication of effort when possible.

Teicholz article “poorly researched and poorly documented”

The BMJ described the article it published as a “BMJ Investigation.” The article begins “The expert report underpinning the next set of US Dietary Guidelines for Americans fails to reflect much relevant scientific literature in its reviews of crucial topics and therefore risks giving a misleading picture, an investigation by the BMJ has found.” The byline, which states “reported by Nina Teicholz,” also represents that the article is a work of investigative journalism.

However, compared with other BMJ investigations and most investigative journalism, this article is poorly researched and poorly documented. The author did not say whether she interviewed DGAC members, Federal government staff members, or others who could describe the actual decision-making and conduct of the panel. She did not cite anyone who had firsthand knowledge of the actual decision making and conduct of the DGAC, such as DGAC members or Federal government staff members, or uncover any information about their processes other than what was described in their report. Online resources that provide information about the DGAC’s systematic review and guideline development process, such as video of public meetings of the DGAC, are not mentioned. No experts in systematic review methods or guideline development methods, who might have commented on whether they agreed with her criticisms, are cited. The author has written that she showed the BMJ manuscript to experts and to two DGAC members, but the article provides no information about what they may have said, either on or off the record.

Teicholz arguments “reflect lack of knowledge”

I am aware that, in the Rapid Response to the article, Teicholz presented a rebuttal to these four points. I reviewed the rebuttal. I do not agree that each appendix DGAC report presents “two contrasting
methodologies.” My interpretation is that the first description of the methodology provides a brief overview and the second provides the details. In systematic review, or supplementary file is used commonly to present additional details of the search strategy, inclusion criteria, and excluded studies. I found that the dates for the literature reviews in the appendices are stated clearly (e.g., January 2009 to August 2014 for the saturated fats evidence portfolio, Appendix E-2.43), and hand searching is a widely used and encouraged method to supplement electronic searches. The aim is to find all the relevant studies. Relying exclusively on electronic searches of bibliographic databases cannot do this.

In any case, the author’s rebuttal is not a plausible rationale for what appeared in the BMJ article. The article in The BMJ does not mention that there were two methodologies, it implies there was none. Many of the author’s arguments in the BMJ article and in her rebuttal to the CSPI letter reflect a lack of knowledge of current practice in guideline development and systematic review methods, and it does not appear that she consulted any experts or published works on these topics.

“An opinion piece, editorial, or even an example of lobbying literature”

The decision to publish the article as a BMJ Investigation is regrettable. The article is better described as an opinion piece, editorial, or even an example of lobbying literature than an independent investigation. Within the article, the phrases “an investigation by the BMJ” and “The BMJ has also found that the committee’s report used weak scientific standards...” obscure the fact that all of the assessments of the DGAC process and findings are the author’s, and that the investigation consisted entirely of a “critical review” of the report by the author.

In 2014, before the DGAC had finished their report, Teicholz had urged beef producers to call their congressional representatives and demand an inquiry of the committee. She also criticized the DGAC report within days of its release in February, 2015. The BMJ article disclosed that Nina Teicholz was a member of the Nutrition-Coalition, but not that this organization and its funder, Action Now Initiative, were actively lobbying the US Congress to question the science behind the DGAC report. Before the BMJ article was published, lobbyists arranged meetings between Teicholz and Congressional officials.

Despite these very concerning issues, I do not recommend that the article should be retracted on the grounds that it is “riddled with errors.” While there are errors, the main problem is that the article contains interpretations, opinions, and poorly informed judgments about what is and isn’t “standard” or “established methods” when it comes to systematic review and guideline development.