

Dear Editor:

A recent article by journalist Nina Teicholz,<sup>1</sup> which was published as a “BMJ Investigation” of the Scientific Report of the 2015 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee (DGAC),<sup>2</sup> included numerous errors and misrepresentations. Below we have summarized only factual errors, excluding incorrect or biased interpretations of research. The mistakes are bolded.

Because the “investigation” as a whole is so riddled with errors, we urge the BMJ to retract it, not only to inform your readers, but also to protect the BMJ’s credibility.

1. Teicholz states that “in its 2015 report the committee stated that it did not use NEL reviews for more than 70% of the topics, including some of the most controversial issues in nutrition. Instead, it relied on systematic reviews by external professional associations, almost exclusively the American Heart Association (AHA) and the American College of Cardiology (ACC), or **conducted an [sic] hoc examination of the scientific literature without well defined systematic criteria for how studies or outside review papers were identified, selected, or evaluated.**”

**Correction:** In Appendix E-2, the Evidence Portfolios for the key topics addressed by Teicholz specify the search strategy, inclusion criteria, search results, and AMSTAR ratings for methodological quality for the existing systematic reviews (SR) and meta-analyses (MA).<sup>3,4</sup>

2. Teicholz states that “instead of requesting a new NEL review for the recent literature on this crucial topic, however, the 2015 committee recommended extending the current cap on saturated fats, at 10% of calories, based on a review by the AHA and ACC, a 2010 NEL review, and the committee’s **ad hoc selection of seven review papers** (see table A on thebmj.com).” Table A states that “**no methodology for this section of the report:** no reason given for why certain studies were selected for review and others were not, nor how they were evaluated relative to each other.”

**Correction:** Appendix E-2.43 gives the search strategy, inclusion criteria, search results, and AMSTAR ratings for methodological quality for the seven review papers, along with a list of excluded articles and the reasons for exclusion.<sup>5</sup> (Note: In Table A, Teicholz states that “the overall conclusion [of the 2012 Cochrane review by Hooper, et al.] is therefore

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bmj.com/content/351/bmj.h4962>

<sup>2</sup> <http://health.gov/dietaryguidelines/2015-scientific-report/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://health.gov/dietaryguidelines/2015-scientific-report/14-appendix-E2/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://health.gov/dietaryguidelines/2015-scientific-report/05-methodology.asp>

<sup>5</sup> <http://health.gov/dietaryguidelines/2015-scientific-report/14-appendix-E2/e2-43.asp>

that while saturated-fat restriction appears to reduce heart attack risk, it does not reduce overall or cardiovascular mortality (death), which is arguably the more important endpoint.”<sup>6</sup> This statement contradicts Teicholz’s article, which said that Hooper, et al. “failed to confirm an association between saturated fats and heart disease.” The BMJ corrected this error a month after it was published.)

3. Teicholz states that “use of **external reviews by professional associations is problematic** because these groups conduct literature reviews according to different standards and are supported by food and drug companies.”

**Correction:** The “problematic” external review cited by Teicholz was not conducted solely by professional associations. The review was actually a “clinical practice guideline” developed by the American Heart Association and the American College of Cardiology in partnership with the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute.<sup>7</sup> The NHLBI’s website clearly describes its rigorous standards for assessing the quality of studies and its policy for managing potential conflicts of interest and relationships with industry.

4. Teicholz states that “in the NEL systematic review on saturated fats from 2010...fewer than 12 small trials are cited, and **none supports the hypothesis that saturated fats cause heart disease** (see table B on thebmj.com).”

**Correction:** It is incorrect to state that none of the trials cited in the 2010 NEL review supports the hypothesis that saturated fats cause heart disease. The 2010 NEL review found “strong evidence” that saturated fat intake increases the risk of cardiovascular disease. In Table B, Teicholz over-rules the 2010 NEL review by assigning each trial to one of four categories (a) “trials that should not have been included because they did not meet inclusion criteria,” (b) “trials that should not have been included because they did not test normally occurring [sic] saturated fats or saturated fats at all,” (c) “trials concluding that saturated fats had a neutral [sic] or beneficial effect on health,” and (d) “trials with mixed results on blood lipid measures.”<sup>8</sup> (Note: Table B has additional errors too numerous to list here.) Thus, Teicholz concludes that the 2010 NEL review is substandard, but she also argues that the 2015 “committee’s report used weak scientific standards,” *because* it did not rely sufficiently on NEL reviews.

5. Teicholz states that “perhaps more important are the **studies that have never been systematically reviewed by any of the dietary guideline committees**. These include the large, government funded randomized controlled trials on saturated fats and heart disease from the 1960s and ’70s. Taken together, these

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<sup>6</sup> [http://www.bmj.com/content/bmj/suppl/2015/09/23/bmj.h4962.DC1/teicholzmaster2609.wt1\\_default.pdf](http://www.bmj.com/content/bmj/suppl/2015/09/23/bmj.h4962.DC1/teicholzmaster2609.wt1_default.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health-pro/guidelines/in-develop/cardiovascular-risk-reduction/lifestyle>

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.bmj.com/content/bmj/suppl/2015/09/23/bmj.h4962.DC1/teicholzmaster2609.wt2\\_default.pdf](http://www.bmj.com/content/bmj/suppl/2015/09/23/bmj.h4962.DC1/teicholzmaster2609.wt2_default.pdf)

trials followed more than 25 000 people, some for up to 12 years. They are some of the most ambitious, well controlled nutrition studies ever undertaken.”

**Correction:** It is incorrect to state that these trials were not reviewed by the DGAC. The DGAC considered a 2012 Cochrane review that included 4 of the 6 trials cited by Teicholz and a 2010 meta-analysis that included 5 of the 6 trials cited by Teicholz.<sup>9,10</sup> (The review and meta-analysis both concluded that replacing saturated fats with unsaturated fats reduce the risk of heart disease.) One trial cited by Teicholz is excluded from most meta-analyses because it tested a multifactorial intervention including drug treatment for hypertension, counseling for cigarette smoking, and dietary advice for lowering blood cholesterol levels.<sup>11</sup>

6. Teicholz states that **“there have been at a minimum, three National Institutes of Health funded trials on some 50 000 people showing that a diet low in fat and saturated fat is ineffective for fighting heart disease, obesity, diabetes, or cancer.** Two of these trials are omitted from the NEL review....When the omitted findings from these three clinical trials are factored into the review, the overwhelming preponderance of rigorous evidence does not support any of the dietary committee’s health claims for its recommended diets.”

**Correction:** The two trials that were “omitted from the NEL review” did not assess the impact of diet “for fighting heart disease, obesity, diabetes, or cancer.” They assessed the impact of diet on serum cholesterol levels.<sup>12,13</sup> Furthermore, all three trials were included in the Cochrane review that was considered by the DGAC.<sup>14</sup>)

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<sup>9</sup> [Hooper L](#), [Summerbell CD](#), [Thompson R](#), [Sills D](#), [Roberts FG](#), [Moore HJ](#), [Davey Smith G](#). Reduced or modified dietary fat for preventing cardiovascular disease. *Cochrane Database Syst Rev*. 2012 May 16;5:CD002137. doi: 10.1002/14651858.CD002137.pub3

<sup>10</sup> Mozaffarian D, Micha R, Wallace S. Effects on coronary heart disease of increasing polyunsaturated fat in place of saturated fat: a systematic review and meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials. *PLoS Med* 2010;7:e1000252.

<sup>11</sup> Multiple Risk Factor Intervention Trial Research Group. Multiple risk factor intervention trial. Risk factor changes and mortality results. *JAMA* 1982;248:1465-77.

<sup>12</sup> Walden CE, Retzlaff BM, Buck BL, Wallick S, McCann BS, Knopp RH. Differential effect of National Cholesterol Education Program (NCEP) Step II diet on HDL cholesterol, its subfractions, and apoprotein A-I levels in hypercholesterolemic women and men after 1 year: The beFIT Study. *Arterioscler Thromb Vasc Biol* 2000;20:1580-7.

<sup>13</sup> Knopp RH, Walden CE, Retzlaff BM, et al. Long-term cholesterol-lowering effects of 4 fat-restricted diets in hypercholesterolemic and combined hyperlipidemic men. The Dietary Alternatives Study. *JAMA* 1997;278:1509-15.

<sup>14</sup> [Hooper L](#), [Summerbell CD](#), [Thompson R](#), [Sills D](#), [Roberts FG](#), [Moore HJ](#), [Davey Smith G](#). Reduced or modified dietary fat for preventing cardiovascular disease. *Cochrane Database Syst Rev*. 2012 May 16;5:CD002137. doi: 10.1002/14651858.CD002137.pub3

7. Teicholz states that “The report also gave a strong rating to the evidence that its recommended diets can fight heart disease....The **committee reviewed other, more recent studies but not using any systematic or predefined methods.**”

**Correction:** Appendix E-2.26 gives the search strategy, inclusion criteria, search results, and AMSTAR ratings for methodological quality for the six “more recent studies,” along with a list of excluded articles and the reasons for exclusion.<sup>15</sup>

8. In Table D, Teicholz includes sections (under “dietary patterns and heart disease” and “dietary patterns and obesity”) entitled “DGAC **ad hoc review** of the scientific literature” where she states that “**no systematic methodology is given for the selection of these studies.** It is therefore impossible to know if they fairly represent the literature.”

**Correction:** These were not ad hoc reviews. The DGAC details the systematic methodology for selecting these studies in Appendices E-2.26 and E2.27.<sup>16</sup> Note: Teicholz’s Table D<sup>17</sup> consists largely of Teicholz’s criticism of the NEL’s Systematic Reviews on the Relationship between Dietary Patterns and Health Outcomes, published in 2014.<sup>18</sup> Note that Teicholz argues that NEL reviews are substandard, but she also argues that the 2015 “committee’s report used weak scientific standards,” *because* it did not rely sufficiently on NEL reviews.

9. Teicholz states that “Consulting the NEL for a review on this topic turns up a surprising fact: a systematic review on health and red meat has not been done. Although several analyses look at ‘animal protein products,’ **these reviews include eggs, fish, and dairy and therefore do not isolate the health effects of red meat,** or meat of any kind.

**Correction:** The NEL reviews cited by Teicholz *do* examine the results on red meat and processed meats separately from the results on other animal proteins.<sup>19,20,21,22,23,24,25</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> <http://health.gov/dietaryguidelines/2015-scientific-report/14-appendix-E2/e2-26.asp>

<sup>16</sup> <http://health.gov/dietaryguidelines/2015-scientific-report/14-appendix-E2/e2-26.asp>

<http://health.gov/dietaryguidelines/2015-scientific-report/14-appendix-E2/e2-27.asp>

<sup>17</sup> [http://www.bmj.com/content/bmj/suppl/2015/09/23/bmj.h4962.DC1/teicholzmaster2609.wt4\\_default.pdf](http://www.bmj.com/content/bmj/suppl/2015/09/23/bmj.h4962.DC1/teicholzmaster2609.wt4_default.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.nel.gov/vault/2440/web/files/DietaryPatterns/DPRptFullFinal.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> [http://www.nel.gov/template.cfm?template=sort\\_list\\_template&key=835](http://www.nel.gov/template.cfm?template=sort_list_template&key=835)

<sup>20</sup> [http://www.nel.gov/evidence.cfm?evidence\\_summary\\_id=250271](http://www.nel.gov/evidence.cfm?evidence_summary_id=250271)

<sup>21</sup> [http://www.nel.gov/evidence.cfm?evidence\\_summary\\_id=250238](http://www.nel.gov/evidence.cfm?evidence_summary_id=250238)

<sup>22</sup> [http://www.nel.gov/evidence.cfm?evidence\\_summary\\_id=250252](http://www.nel.gov/evidence.cfm?evidence_summary_id=250252)

<sup>23</sup> [http://www.nel.gov/evidence.cfm?evidence\\_summary\\_id=250239](http://www.nel.gov/evidence.cfm?evidence_summary_id=250239)

<sup>24</sup> [http://www.nel.gov/evidence.cfm?evidence\\_summary\\_id=250237](http://www.nel.gov/evidence.cfm?evidence_summary_id=250237)

<sup>25</sup> [http://www.nel.gov/evidence.cfm?evidence\\_summary\\_id=250276](http://www.nel.gov/evidence.cfm?evidence_summary_id=250276)

**10.** Teicholz states that “The committee’s approach to the evidence on saturated fats and low carbohydrate diets reflects an apparent failure to address any evidence that contradicts what has been official nutritional advice for the past 35 years. **The foundation of that advice has been to recommend eating less fat and fewer animal products (meat, dairy, eggs)** while shifting calorie intake towards more plant foods (fruits, vegetables, grains, and vegetable oils) for good health. And in the past decades, this advice has remained virtually unchanged.”

**Correction:** The 2015 DGAC did not recommend “eating less fat” or reducing the consumption of eggs or dairy products. (In fact, Teicholz wrote in a February *New York Times* op-ed that “experts on the committee that develops the country’s dietary guidelines acknowledged that they had ditched the low-fat diet.”<sup>26</sup>) The *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* has never recommended eating less meat or dairy products. (In some editions, the *DGA* has included advice such as “moderate your use of eggs” or “use egg yolks and whole eggs in moderation. Use egg whites and egg substitutes freely...”).

**11.** Teicholz states that “studies showed mixed health outcomes for saturated fats, but early critical reviews, including one by the National Academy of Sciences, which cautioned against the inconclusive state of the evidence on saturated fats and heart disease, **were dismissed by the USDA** when it launched the first dietary guidelines in 1980.”

**Correction:** The USDA (and DHHS) published the 1980 Dietary Guidelines for Americans in February 1980. *Toward Healthful Diets*, the National Academy of Sciences report cited by Teicholz, was published in May 1980.<sup>27</sup> USDA could not have dismissed *Toward Healthful Diets*, because the report was published *after* the Dietary Guidelines were released.

In summary, the Teicholz/BMJ “investigation” is based on non-facts. Such a paper has no place in the pages of a prominent scientific journal and should be retracted.

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<sup>26</sup> Teicholz N. The government’s bad diet advice. The New York Times, 2015 Feb 20.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/21/opinion/when-the-government-tells-you-what-to-eat.html>

<sup>27</sup> National Research Council, Food and Nutrition Board, National Academy of Sciences. *Toward Healthful Diets*. National Academy Press, 1980.

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