

COMMENTS OF FOOD DATA BANK DEVELOPMENT AND USE

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There are a large number of easily identifiable problems that should be of concern to this group. Some of them are:

Data banks are proliferating and will have a tendency to perpetuate themselves. The use of different data banks will yield different results when no differences exist in the data being analyzed. The only unifying activity appears to be the USDA food composition data. Sooner or later the utility of the different compilations will be questioned.

What data should get into the data bank? I would be somewhat surprised if the criteria utilized by the USDA group would be entirely satisfactory for everyone or are well enough described so that others could apply similar criteria. I suppose some judgment is always required. How then do we reach agreement on the data entered?

How good does the data really have to be? A major use, although not the only use, is the evaluation of dietary intake data. These will probably always be rather poor data and of unknown accuracy since dietary data depend upon estimates of serving size, ability to recall, variations in recipes and preparation procedures, source of the food, etc. We can waste a lot of time, energy, and money getting accurate data on food composition which may not be justified.

How many foods should be in the data bank? How do we cope with the 10-20,000 foods that are presumably in the marketplace and the continual changes which are made? Can we concentrate on the general foods which make up 90-95% of the diets and forget about the rest?

What conclusions can we legitimately draw from dietary data however good the data bank is? The dietary data- whether for one day or one week- do not estimate the intake of an individual with any accuracy. Most of us find it difficult to talk of the data without stating or suggesting how many individuals deviate from the standard. I'm sure this is not a justifiable conclusion, yet this is usually what we would like to know. Can we or how can we move toward some consensus on what legitimate conclusions can be drawn?

Many of these questions will become increasingly important especially if legislation permits labeling of foods based upon food composition tables. There is also increasing concern about dietary surveillance methodology.