

her to the awards ceremony. She arrived together with her aides decked out in blue from head to foot and everyone present was granted a free container of blue Jell-O.

Not everyone is happy about Marc Abrahams and his approach to scientific studies, though. In 1995 he awarded his Ig Nobel Prize for Physics to a group of researchers from Norwich, England, for producing “A

Study of the Effects of Water Content on the Compaction Behaviour of Breakfast Cereal Flakes,” basically a study of how breakfast cereals turn soggy. Robert May, the British government’s chief scientific advisor, responded with a sharp criticism for poking fun at the study. In a letter to Abrahams, May censured Abrahams’ efforts to mock respected scientists and professors.

Tickets to the annual Ig Nobel awards ceremony sell out almost as soon as they become available. Abrahams’ magazine comes out every two months and plans are in the works to publish it monthly.

Nine thousand applications are filed each year at the office of the Prize Committee. Nine thousand people want their research studies to be recognized as the

most inane study. For that dubious recognition, they are willing to pay for plane tickets, invest time and money writing a paper, and become famous for publishing one of the world’s most idiotic research studies. The main thing is that someone will recognize them. Not for nothing do our sages say: “Envy, lust and honor remove a person from the world.” ■

# 50 Years Of Saturated Fats For Nothing?

## How Misinformation Tricked Americans into Following a Low-Fat Diet

For the past 50 years, American health agencies and doctors led a battle against the consumption of red meat, butter, whole milk, etc. And many Americans have followed their instructions faithfully.

Was the movement against fatty foods correct? If we accept new revelations, the answer is no. We were taken for a ride. A low-fat ride. It turns out that the healthy studies that sent Americans on extreme diets were riddled with errors. These foods are not nearly as harmful as was once believed, and they may actually be beneficial.



Dov Levy

**I**t all began in the 1950s when America was attacked by a problem that no one understood. An epidemic of heart attacks struck middle-aged people who outwardly appeared to be in perfect health. Among the victims was President Dwight D.

Eisenhower, whose heart problems while in office drew national attention to the issue. Heart attacks had become the number one cause of death in America almost overnight.

When doctors examined patients who suffered heart attacks they discovered that

they all had high levels of cholesterol in their blood. As a result, they concluded that cholesterol must be the main cause responsible for blocking the arteries and cutting off the blood supply to the heart muscles.

The source of high blood cholesterol, doctors found, was an abundance of meat, eggs, butter, cheese and more, all of them foods rich in saturated fats. Availability of these foods was restricted during the Second World War, forcing Americans onto low-fat diets. Now that the restrictions had been lifted and people had taken to eating these “unhealthy” foods in larger quantities, they were suffering widespread heart attacks.

The connection between foods that are high in saturated fats and heart disease was first recognized by an American physiologist named Ancel Keys. In 1953, he visited Italy and Spain, where the rate of heart attacks was much lower than in America. Keys discovered that people in those countries ate far less meat and dairy products than in America and he decided that the two factors had to be related.

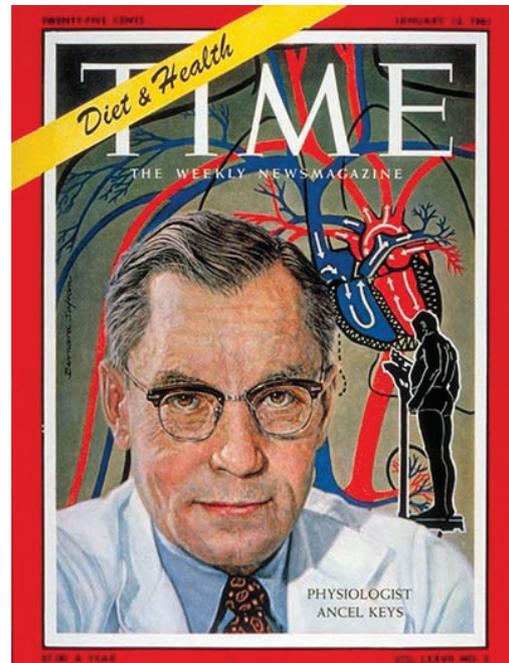
That assessment by Keys, a researcher at the University of Minnesota, triggered a medical revolution. It was immediately accepted as fact. This was partially driven by Congress, which was largely occupied by middle-aged men whose meals were heavy in the vilified foods. Many congressmen took a special interest in Keys’ findings and thereby influenced the rest of the country. President Eisenhower also turned his attention, almost to the point of obsession, to his blood cholesterol levels, and he followed a strict diet low in saturated fats. (At the time, it did not occur to anyone that the president’s heart attack may have been a result of his bad habit in previous years of smoking four packs of cigarettes a day!)

Eisenhower’s private physician, Paul White, America’s most prominent cardiologist, praised Keys’ study as “brilliant” in a front-page article in *The New York Times*.

Overnight, Keys became a nationally respected figure in the scientific and academic world. He received invitations from

all over to deliver speeches about his study and findings. Keys made a habit of delivering impassioned lectures decrying America’s health problems. In 1961, his image appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine.

“Americans have adopted an unhealthy diet in recent years,” Keys stated. Americans had left the ways of their parents who stuck to a diet rich in produce and very low in meat. Therefore, the solution to the epidemic of heart attacks was for Americans to reduce



In 1961, Ancel Keys appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine after his study linking fatty foods to heart disease made him famous.



President Eisenhower appears in public for the first time after his heart attack in 1955.



Left: Supporters of the American Heart Association form up in the shape of a heart. Right: Conference of the American Heart Association in Dallas, Texas.

their intake of foods heavy in saturated fats. He strongly promoted a Mediterranean diet consisting of fruits and vegetables, bread and pasta products, olive oil and fish.

Other scientists proposed alternate theories to explain the high incidence of heart attacks in the US. But the American Heart Association, whose stated goal was to reduce heart disease in America, adopted Keys’ theory and disseminated his message. Now the theory had become, for all intents and purposes, fact. (No one seemed to notice or care that the American Heart Association was financed by Proctor and Gamble, a producer of vegetable oil that stood to gain enormously from a diet driving Americans away from saturated fats.)

During the 1960s, the American government officially adopted the stance that saturated fats were the enemy. Congress earmarked large sums of money for various efforts to protect citizens from unhealthy foods. In 1977, Senator George McGovern revealed the results of a study he organized. Its unpleasant conclusion was that during the last 50 years Americans had switched to a dangerous diet that had terribly negative effects on their health. He declared that the solution was for Americans to return to their predecessors’ healthier diets that were rich in produce.

## Faulty Study

Few people were aware of it, but there was a major contradiction in Ancel Keys’

study that he had decided to ignore. He had found that the Swiss eat plenty of fatty foods, as do the Swedes, Norwegians, Danes and Germans. Yet these peoples did not suffer from heart attacks at the rate that Americans did!

Critics of Keys pointed out the inconsistencies in his study from the beginning. In order to quiet them, in 1956 Keys used a massive government grant to conduct a major study of diets and heart disease rates in seven different countries. He intended to make it absolutely clear that his theory was correct.

He visited Holland, Finland, Yugoslavia, Italy, Greece and Japan, in addition to continuing his studies in the United States. He examined a total of 13,000 people. Yet, by an “astonishing coincidence,” he failed to visit any of the countries that had provided the results that contradicted his original study.

A health researcher who studied Keys’ survey found additional problems and confirmed that even within the seven countries in Keys’ report the data had been tampered with. For example, in Greece, Keys had performed his study during Lent, a traditional 46-day period of abstinence observed in some Christian circles. During this time many people refrain from eating meat, fish, eggs, cheese or butter. It is estimated that around 60% of Greeks observe this period, but Keys left out this critical detail when he published his report. He also made no effort to discover any health differences between