Introduction to the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute Workshop on Salt and Blood Pressure

Although mention of the relation between salt intake and the circulatory system can be found in ancient writings, the main body of research on this topic has been accumulated over the past 40-50 years. Early investigators worked in areas that spanned the research spectrum from populations to patients to experimental animals. However, during the last 10-15 years, a divergence of activity and perspectives has emerged between scientists working in the public health sciences of observational epidemiology and clinical trials and those doing studies of pathophysiology, both in human and animal subjects. Increasing complexity of methodology has undoubtedly played a part in this apparent separation. The initiators of the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute Workshop on Salt and Blood Pressure, held in Bethesda, Md., November 1-2, 1989, believed that this divergence was unfortunate and that a thorough interchange would be beneficial for insight into research methods, for appropriate interpretation of findings, and for identification of future areas of collaboration in research.

Accordingly, the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute sponsored this Workshop on Salt and Blood Pressure with the following objectives: 1) to review the evidence from epidemiological, clinical, and experimental studies regarding the relation of sodium to blood pressure levels; 2) to consider questions related to variation in the human response to sodium, and associated mechanisms; 3) to review research findings related to clinical and public health implications of the salt-blood pressure relation; and 4) to provide recommendations for future research.

Approximately 100 scientists and guests participated in and heard 29 papers presented summarizing various research and health policy areas, as well as remarks by seven invited discussants and a special panel on public health implications. Those 36 papers and the panel discussion are presented as workshop proceedings in this Hypertension supplement. They are organized into seven sections, along with edited transcripts of the general discussion that accompanied most of the segments, as follows: 1) Epidemiological Overview, 2) Animal Models, 3) Salt Sensitivity, 4) Demographic Modifiers of the Salt–Blood Pressure Relation, 5) Environmental/Metabolic Modifiers of the Salt–Blood Pressure Relation, 6) Factors in Reducing Salt Intake, and 7) Research and Public Health Directions.

Given the broad range of topics and disciplines represented, it was gratifying to observe both considerable commonality of interests and agreement on conclusions; however, it was also clear that there remains a full agenda for future research.

We express our appreciation to all those who contributed to the workshop and these proceedings. The contributions of the authors and discussants are self-evident, but special additional thanks are due the members of the Planning Committee, who were (in addition to the Guest Editors) Dr. Richard Grimm Jr., Dr. Shiriki Kumanyika, Dr. Allyn Mark, Professor Rose Stamler, and Dr. Jay Sullivan. We would also like to thank Dr. William Harlan for moderating the special panel discussion; Colleen Brown for handling logistical arrangements for the workshop; and the editorial staff of Hypertension, especially Karen Potvin Klein and David Syring, for coordinating the review and preparation of this supplement.

JEFFREY A. CUTLER
Bethesda, Md.

THEODORE A. KOTCHEN
Morgantown, W.Va.

EVA OBARZANEK
Bethesda, Md.

Guest Editors
The National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute Workshop on Salt and Blood Pressure.

Hypertension. 1991;17:I1

doi: 10.1161/01.HYP.17.1_Suppl.I1

Hypertension is published by the American Heart Association, 7272 Greenville Avenue, Dallas, TX 75231
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Print ISSN: 0194-911X. Online ISSN: 1524-4563

The online version of this article, along with updated information and services, is located on the World Wide Web at:
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