The Role of Pediatricians as Innovators in Pediatric Nutrition

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Innovation is about making changes. When it comes to health care, innovations, though they may be something ‘new’, they may not be beneficial if not an improvement over what is current practice. Innovations in pediatric nutrition result from advances in nutritional research or technology as well as by cooperation with government health agencies and professional societies to develop new public policy to improve pediatric nutrition. Pediatricians have a long history of making innovations in the field of nutrition. Perhaps the greatest ‘innovation’ was the cooperation of pediatricians with public health officials to establish safe water and milk supplies at the turn of the 20th century, which had a profoundly positive effect on infant mortality. Another very important innovation was the development of infant formula as a safe alternative to breastfeeding, which required the cooperation of pediatricians and private industry. Often, however, ‘innovations’ turn out not to be truly innovative, including many of the additions to infant formula over the years. In general, as pointed out by the 1998 LSRO report, there is lack of knowledge of the true requirements for many nutrients in formulae as well the potential risks associated with high intakes of many nutrients. This makes many nutrient recommendations based more on expert opinion than fundamental knowledge of nutrient requirements. In the 21st century, pediatricians will continue to be innovators in pediatric nutrition by their efforts in research, education and advocacy to effect improvement of patient care. They will continue to work with other health care professionals, various professional societies, government agencies, the media and private industry. However, it is lamented that pediatricians will likely play less of a role in hypothesis-driven research in the years ahead.