



NCHS Board of Scientific Counselors Meets

May 19, 2014

The Board of Scientific Counselors (BSC) for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) held its biannual meeting on May 12 and 13. Chaired by Raynard Kington, Grinnell College, the BSC is charged with providing advice and making recommendations to NCHS and Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) leadership regarding the scientific and technical program goals and objectives, strategies, and priorities of the Center. Sessions included a review of the NCHS Office of Analysis and Epidemiology, an update on the National Study of Long-Term Care Providers, and a presentation on using mortality data to conduct public health surveillance

NCHS Director Charles Rothwell updated the Board on NCHS' activities. He noted the frequencies with which the press covers NCHS' findings; they appeared in more than 370 media articles in the first four months of 2014. In the coming months, NCHS plans to hire a new Deputy Director as well as someone who will head their policy and planning efforts. The Center is also planning to reorganize its data display and visualization efforts. Rothwell went over the funding for fiscal year (FY) 2014 and the Administration's budget proposal for FY 2015 (for more see COSSA's [FY 2015 budget analysis](#)).

The National Health Interview Survey (NHIS) is on track to release public-use data files for the 2013 survey in June. In September 2014, NCHS will put out an Early Release report on health insurance based on preliminary NHIS data from the first quarter of 2014, when the *Affordable Care Act* (ACA) went into effect. In February and March 2014, the Center launched the first ever Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander NHIS.

Politicization of Data: The Example of Childhood Obesity Trends

Cynthia Ogden, National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) Analysis Branch Chief and epidemiologist, shared her experience as one of the authors of a paper on obesity trends that received a high level of media attention when it was published in February. The paper in question, published in *JAMA*, was titled "Prevalence of Childhood and Adult Obesity in the United States, 2011-2012." It used data from the 2011-2012 NHANES to estimate obesity prevalence in the U.S. and compared the results to data from 2003-2004 to get a sense of trends over the past decade. Ogden explained, as did the paper in *JAMA*, that 2003-2004 was selected as a starting point for looking at trends because, for the most part, there were no significant linear trends across the various age groups over that time (earlier than 2003-2004, the trend was a steady increase in obesity). Across most age groups, the study found no significant changes in the obesity rate, except for women over 60, for whom obesity prevalence increased from 31.5 percent in 2003-2004 to 38.1 percent in 2011-2012, and for children aged 2-5 years,

1

for whom the obesity rate decreased from 13.9 percent to 8.4 percent. The study concluded, “Overall, there have been no significant changes in obesity prevalence in youth or adults between 2003-2004 and 2011-2012.”

However, the decline in obesity among young children was picked up on first by a CDC press release, which calculated the percent change over the decade in question and noted the “decline of 43 percent.” The article’s authors approved the press release, and as Ogden noted, there was nothing factually incorrect in presenting the results this way. Next, the White House issued its own press release, which tied the finding to the *Let’s Move!* initiative, stating, “We are seeing real progress.” The *New York Times* published an article with the headline “Obesity Rate for Young Children Plummet 43 Percent in a Decade.” Ogden noted that the article itself was accurate, but the use of the loaded word “plummet” and the focus on the 43 percent drop in the headline was not the way she and her coauthors would have presented their findings.

After the reports in the *New York Times* and other popular outlets, there was a backlash against the paper; two *Freedom of Information Act* (FOIA) requests were filed to make public all correspondence pertaining to the study, other outlets published stories suggesting its findings were “overblown,” and Ogden received several “less than professional” emails. In April, researchers at the University of North Carolina (UNC) published a similar study, this time looking at trends in obesity among children from 1999 to 2012, which found an increase in the obesity rate. A UNC press release presented this paper “in contrast to” the previously published *JAMA* study. Ogden noted that, for the most part, the papers were not contradictory; depending on where you start looking at the trend, you can see an increase or a decrease. And in mid-April, the *New York Times* published a follow-up article, [“Obesity Studies Tell Two Stories, Both Right.”](#)

Ogden concluded by reaffirming her confidence in the *JAMA* paper, noting that the analysis of age and gender subgroups was presented as a “cautious interpretation.” She pointed out that the next NHANES, 2013-2014, will help researchers gain clarity on the trends. However, Ogden observed that perhaps trends in subgroups are better examined over four-year intervals, rather than two, and suggested that researchers pay careful attention to the way they are examining trends (time periods, linear vs. quadratic, etc.).

In a discussion following the presentation, Rothwell observed that Ogden’s experience is likely to be a toned-down version of what NCHS will face in the fall when it publishes health-care coverage estimates related to the ACA. He asked the BSC to consider what lessons can be learned in terms of how to present data to the public to ensure that it is accurately interpreted and reported and how to prevent misunderstanding or misuse of findings.

