

Views & News

Lifting the profile of nutrition in Australia

The National Nutrition Committee (NNC) and the Australian Nutrition Trust Fund held a one day meeting on 1 December "Lifting The Profile Of Nutritional Science". Members of the NNC and 14 invited nutrition scientists* all spoke, each on an allocated aspect of nutrition today in Australia. First, some of the problems that were discussed and then some possible answers.

Some of the problems:

- (1) In Australia the federal government gave up a leading role in nutrition education, when the NH&MRC's Nutrition Standing Committee was discontinued and officials in the Department of Health became general managers rather than specialists, e.g in nutrition.
- (2) The way nutrition research comes across to the average consumer is confusing. Commercial pressures and the need of journalists to be sensational are major reasons for this.
- (3) At the professional level there seem to be too many nutrition journals and they have low impact factors so that the "news" in nutrition research is scattered all over the literature.
- (4) Food companies would like health claims on foods but nutrition scientists are less enthusiastic. Most of the health benefits of particular food ingredients don't meet the full criteria of evidence-based medicine and if one food is singled out as healthy this can lead to dietary imbalance.
- (5) Consumers' food knowledge and food handling skills are found by research to be weaker than often assumed. Teaching in schools about food and nutrition ("Food literacy") was never high status and is costly if practical work is included. It has suffered by being split between D & T (Design and Technology) and PDHPE (Personal Development, Health and Physical Education).
- (6) Australia is seeing an epidemic of overweight in children and obesity in adults. Research shows an association between overweight and long hours of watching TV. Most of the foods advertised on TV are "fast" and dense in energy (fat and sugar). The NH&MRC's 1981 report on TV advertising of foods to children has never been acted upon.

Some suggested answers:

- (1) With each change of government, nutritionists hope for re-establishment of a central committee in Health to interpret new researchers and convert this into national policy and education (SIGNAL isn't doing this). It's helpful that some funding has been allocated in the last 3 years for preparation of dietary guidelines for three age bands of Australians. Monitoring of food intake and nutritional surveillance can only be done by government and in Australia this has been too much in bits and pieces.
- (2) Now that R & D tax allowances have been restored it will be possible for food industry to organise more scientific research on functional foods.

(3) A proposal was made that the Academy of Science should look into the teaching of food and nutrition skills in our schools - and make recommendations how to strengthen it.

(4) University nutrition departments could put some of their research person-power onto neglected (and difficult) topics like the impact of advertising on children's overweight and on construction of evidence-based sustainable food and nutrition policy. All our university nutrition groups are small. They could make more contribution to nutrition research if they would collaborate in multi-centre studies.

(5) Two of Australia's nutrition journals merged at the end of 2001 - Proceedings of the Nutrition Society will now be published in the Asia Pacific Journal of Clinical Nutrition. This should be a helpful move.

(6) We should follow the Dutch, Scandinavians etc and have more young Australian nutritionists working in our neighbouring countries: Indonesia, China, SE Asia and Pacific Islands. The Asia Pacific Journal of Clinical Nutrition has led the way in showing that we must work with our neighbours in the region, for our benefits as well as theirs.

(7) Qualified dietitians are one large group of professional nutritionists (2,200). They have recently shown the benefits to their profession of accreditation, of having full time professionals in a national office and of media training for some of their members. The Dietitians Association would now like to find the funds for research fellowships to investigate the effectiveness of clinical dietetics and prepare guidelines on best dietetic practice.

(8) For the rest of our nutritionists there was discussion whether a register of accredited nutritionists, as in the UK now, would be helpful and affordable. Nutrition organizations, including the NNC of AAS are members of the Federation of Australian Nutritionists (FANO) which serves to coordinate and hopefully to lobby for Australian nutrition.

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