

Fred Clements Memorial Lecture

Nutrition through the life cycle: building on a long tradition

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Background – The ‘science of nutrition and the science and art of dietetics can be likened to a rope of many strands twisted around a central core representing food with a series of inputs representing progressively the various sciences and then several of the humanities...’(1). In likening the ever-expanding range of the nutritional sciences beyond ‘vitamins, cholesterol, sugar and fats’, Dr Fred Clements showed his characteristic breadth of thinking that made this unassuming scientist a major influence in the course of nutrition, and its teaching, in Australia for decades.

Review- The plenary theme of this 30th meeting of the Nutrition Society of Australia ‘Nutrition through the Lifecycle’ is a direct descendant of the emphasis he placed on the whole individual and his/her role in a wider society, at a time when the emphasis was more on the biochemistry of nutrients, the emerging nutritional epidemiology and clinical dietetics. It is instructive to look at the programme of the first Annual Meeting of the Nutrition Society of Australia when, as the Society’s first president (1975-76), Fred Clements spoke on the nutrition of children in Australia with particular reference to underprivileged groups (2). Strikingly for that time, he noted that Aboriginal workers would need to be heavily involved in any solutions to the undernutrition and poor health of their children.

This first meeting 30 years ago sums up much of the person he was: a scientist with respect for evidence; a human being with concern for children and those from ‘underprivileged groups’; the educationalist wanting to disseminate the new science and knowledge; and finally, someone with an international approach whose career included time at the World Health Organization Headquarters in Geneva. Nevertheless he also urged that the new Nutrition Society of Australia adopt guidelines for the interests and activities of the Society; and that these should interpret both contemporary and local issues, and ‘should not accept, uncritically, those of similar organizations in other countries.’ What would he find today? Acceptance of the need to intervene throughout the life-cycle; shock that 11 million children globally are dying from the want of known interventions- and that the cause of over half of these deaths are due to underlying undernutrition (3); and, likely amazement at the global epidemic, including in Australia, of obesity and noncommunicable diseases, including in children and adolescents (4).

Conclusions- The social dimensions of nutrition remain even more important than when first espoused in Australia by Fred Clements in the first Society meeting in 1976. Interventions must be evidence-based and continue throughout the life-cycle because of the intergenerational dimensions and because poor foetal and young child nutrition, besides demonstrating continuing global inequities, will have consequences in the global epidemic of noncommunicable diseases.

References

1. Clements FW. A history of human nutrition in Australia. Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1986.
2. Clements FW. Nutrition in children in Australia with particular reference to under-privileged groups. Proc Nutr Soc Aust 1976;1:1-7.
3. UNICEF. Progress for children. A report card on nutrition. New York: UNICEF, 2006;4:1-33.
4. Darnton-Hill I, Nishida C, James WPT. A life course approach to diet, nutrition and the prevention of chronic diseases. Publ Health Nutr 2004;7(1A):101-21.