NSA Lecture in Honour of

Dr Frederick (Fred) WA Clements (1904-1995)

OBE, MBBS, MD, DPH, DTM, FRACP, FTS

A. Stewart Truswell1, Ian Darnton-Hill2, Beverley Wood3

1 Human Nutrition Unit, University of Sydney NSW 2006 Australia, 2 UNICEF, United Nations Plaza, New York, USA, 3 Victorian Local Government Association, 60 Leiceser St, Carlton Vic 3053, Australia

Abstract

Dr Fred Clements (1904–1995) was Australia’s first major nutrition scientist. A medical graduate from The University of Sydney and a specialist paediatrician, he was senior lecturer in nutrition and child health at the School of Public Health, University of Sydney 1931–38. 1938–49 he directed the Commonwealth Department of Health’s Nutrition Unit in Canberra. He directed Australia’s first national nutrition survey in 1944. 1949–51 he was Chief of the Nutrition Unit at WHO, Geneva. 1952 to 1975 he returned to lecturing and researching at Sydney’s Institute of Child Health. He was the first supervisor of the Postgraduate Diploma in Nutrition and Dietetics. He was the first President of the Nutrition Society of Australia (1975–6). His 107 scientific publications are listed here. They include major contributions on iodine deficiency, on nutrition across Australia and on many aspects of child health.

Biographical Summary

Following the Fred Clements lecture by Dr Ian Darnton-Hill [UNICEF, New York] at the Nutrition Society’s Conference on 28 November 2006 [at UNSW, Sydney] we have prepared these brief notes about the first President of the Nutrition Society of Australia (1975–76).

Fred Clements was Australia’s first major nutrition scientist. He graduated in Medicine at University of Sydney in 1928. He was awarded the MD in 1937 for a thesis on “Tropical ulcer with special reference to its etiology”.

1931–38: Senior Lecturer in Nutrition & Child Health at the School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, Sydney.

1938–49: Director, Commonwealth Department of Health’s Nutrition Unit, Australian Institute of Anatomy, Canberra.

1949–51: Seconded to be the inaugural Chief of Nutrition Unit, WHO, Geneva.

1952–69: Senior Lecturer, Institute of Child Health, University of Sydney.

1967: Awarded OBE (Order of the British Empire) “in recognition of services to medicine”.

1967–75: Supervisor and lecturer, Postgraduate Diploma of Nutrition and Dietetics, University of Sydney.

While he was Director of the Nutrition Unit in Canberra many surveys were made in Australia and overseas including:

* Infants and young children across Australia.
* In the Territory of Papua
* Of Aboriginal Food Consumption Survey, 1944
* The Australian Food Consumption Survey, 1944
* Of Iodine Deficiency

The unit was responsible for nutrition research, applied nutrition programs and nutrition education for professionals and the public. The Unit started Food and Nutrition Notes and Reviews (which continues today as “Nutrition and Dietetics” – now run by Blackwells and Dietitians Association of Australia). The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) started Apparent Consumption of Food and Nutrition in Australia in association with the Nutrition Unit.

One of the major themes of Clements’ research was a long-term study of endemic goitre in Tasmania, with interventions. The results and developments attracted international attention. (Clements’ leadership in iodine deficiency disorders (IDD) was followed by other Australians – notably, Professors Hetzel and more recently Eastman). Dr Clements was an able manager, and an outstanding teacher, ahead of his time. He had very broad interests that stand out in his list of publications. (He had a talent for writing as well).

He was a pioneer in taking seriously the interplay of social conditions and science; the effects of disadvantage on health and nutrition outcomes and the need for integrated approaches to such issues. This is well seen in his plenary lecture to the first meeting of the Nutrition Society of Australia. Another point coming from his writings is that he must have been one of the first health personnel to recognise that Aboriginal health would not get better without involvement of Aboriginal people and communities.

We can only wish that Australia still had a vigorous federal government Nutrition Unit, able to make nutrition surveys here and overseas, and a standing Nutrition Committee of the NH&MRC. Some of the problems that Clements worked on are still with us today – poverty, Aboriginal (ill) health, school tuckshops, oral hygiene, nutrition education of doctors, pharmacists and people in general, iodine deficiency, etc.

Our Society’s first president was an inspiration for all of us.
List of Publications
We have collected and checked Fred Clements scientific publications, in the list that follows.

15. Clements FW (1941) Diet and Nutrition for the Australian People. Angus & Robertson, in conjunction with the Commonwealth Department of Health (98 pp).
34. Joint FAO/WHO Expert Committee on Nutrition (1953) Third Report. WHO, Geneva (FW Clements a Member for WHO). [This was the UN committee that “discovered” kwashiorkor].
58. Clements FW (Chairman) and 7 others. (1959) Report of a Committee appointed to review the nutritive significance of Australian bread. NH&MRC Special Report Series no 9, Canberra.
77. 2nd edition 1970;
78. 3rd edition 1976;
79. 4th edition 1980;
80. 5th edition 1985;
104. Clements FW (1980) Food and nutrition: understanding the foods you eat. Reed, Terry Hills, NSW