

Nutrition research in the Asia Pacific region

Mark L Wahlqvist

There are pressing needs and growing opportunities for nutrition research of various kinds in the Asia Pacific region, and for this research to be generated by the people of the region, in sociocultural and economic context. The needs arise because of:

- (1) rapid changes in the food supply with increased availability and variable nutrient density (as fat, sugar and alcohol intake increase)
- (2) changing health profiles with increased life expectancy but more chronic noncommunicable disease and the particular nutritionally related problems of the aged
- (3) urbanisation with an altered food supply, loss of traditional knowledge and skills and unfamiliar eating arrangements (ready-to-eat, in traffic, away from home), and the uncertain effects of pollution on nutritional status
- (4) migration within and between countries for work or an account of rural poverty; and travel, with acquisition of new ideas
- (5) the rise in information science, including food and nutrition informatics
- (6) rising affluence and education with changing expectations of the food supply
- (7) rekindled interest in traditional foods and medicines (eg. jamu in Indonesia).

The time is also ripe for good Asia Pacific nutrition research because of:

- (1) an increased research work-force
- (2) a growing number of centres of nutrition excellence
 - a) National Institutes of Nutrition (sometimes combined with preventive medicine or hygiene) in China, Japan, Thailand, Philippines, Vietnam and elsewhere
 - b) Regional Collaborative Centres like the SEAMEO-TROPMED Centres for Community Nutrition in Jakarta and Hanoi
 - c) other Biomedical Research Institutes which encourage nutrition research, such as the Eijkman Institute (Director, Professor Sangkot Marzuki) in Jakarta
 - d) various university hospitals, faculties and departments

- (3) increased funding
- (4) problem definition through training, field work and international conferences in the region like those of the Federation of Asian Nutrition Societies, International Symposia on Clinical Nutrition and the Asia Pacific Clinical Nutrition Society and also national meetings
- (5) newer methodologies in nutrition epidemiology, food analysis, community (eg. Rapid Assessment Procedures) and individual nutrition assessment, and in health assessment
- (6) regional collaboration

But there are barriers which are only slowly being overcome, namely:

- (1) the need for mentors and host institutions (eg. Monash University in Melbourne and its link to the National University of Vietnam in Hanoi)
- (2) networking-- now improving with regional research projects (eg. Nutrition and Ethnicity, co-ordinated by Dr Bridget Hsu-Hage), use of the Internet/ World Wide Web
- (3) Sympathetic and supportive journals-- a function of the Asia Pacific Journal of Clinical Nutrition, and various national journals like *Acta Nutrimenta Sinica*, and the *Malaysian Journal of Nutrition*
- (4) the difficulties of multidisciplinary research, between the agricultural, food, social, biological, health, and educational sciences, not just in execution, but in access to each other's literature (eg. medline for biomedical sciences, but not other sciences)
- (5) the problems of defining and solving nutrition-based dilemmas of indigenous people.

Some of these issues have recently been of concern to Australian nutrition scientists whose summarised position, developed under the auspices of the Australian Nutrition Trust, is published in this issue of APJCN, together with a commentary by Dr Dorothy Mackerras on nutrition research and the public health sector.

There are very real possibilities that major progress will be made in resolving international nutrition research issues in the Asia Pacific region in the next decade, early in the next millenium.