

Letter to the Editor

Dear friends and colleagues, let's get real

Sir,

Professor Svein Kolset has written a trenchant letter¹ on what's to be done about the pandemic of obesity, especially in children. This letter develops his theme and is to all of us who profess and practise nutrition science and food and nutrition policy.

Dear friends and colleagues, let's get real. Do any of us really believe that the current increases in the global rates of obesity, and of diabetes, metabolic syndrome and all the other causally related disorders and diseases including vascular diseases and common cancers, can be reversed or checked, at any time in the future, within the current framework of international political and economic policies, and academic and professional practice? If you do, please write an evidence-based rejoinder to this letter.

As I see it, the only way forward requires the profession to get out of its comfort zone. What is the one great example of action in public health nutrition that is succeeding, against the tides of these times? The move back to breastfeeding. Why, is because militant civil society organisations have not only seized the moral high ground, but also, by gaining special access to media gatekeepers and relentless intelligent pressure, have in alliance with radical scientists practically forced UN agencies, national governments, the baby food industry and also the academic community to agree policies and programmes accepting that breastmilk is the one and only right nourishment for infants and young children.

How, is indicated in a new book written on behalf of the International Baby Food Action Network, originally published by the Dag Hammarskjold Foundation². In the foreword Halfdan Mahler, WHO Director-General from 1973 to 1988, referring to the Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes³, one great step towards the recent Strategy on Infant and Young Child Feeding⁴, states of IBFAN and its sister organisations: 'Without their constant lobbying, reminding us of our duty as public health officers, even harassing us for months on end... there would have never been a Code. WHO simply would not have had the courage to get on with it'.

What has this got to do with nutrition and food policy academics and professionals? Everything, if we want to improve public health. We must seek out the food and nutrition equivalents of Greenpeace, give them recognition and support, and work with them. More, we should be prepared to stand up and be counted, following the example of the many leading academics working within the civil society organisations campaigning to protect breastfeeding.

More still, we should be prepared to help found, fund and run citizens' action groups. Might this put our jobs and careers on the line? You had better believe that it will.

Thus, why has the British government paid attention to the compelling evidence that salt, consumed at typical levels, is a major cause of high blood pressure and strokes, and really is taking steps to reduce salt in the food supply? Just because of the objective evidence? Dream on! This is because Consensus Action on Salt and Health (CASH)⁵, the advocacy group masterminded by Graham MacGregor and other scientists, has since its beginnings gone over the top and made the evidence-based case against salt clearly, unequivocally, relentlessly, and – the food giants whose profits depend on making foods salty and their front organisations and flacks might well say – ferociously and ruthlessly.

Citizens' action groups are not sufficient to improve public health, but they are necessary. Unless we recognise this, and work, act and speak out in alliance with civil society, as many academics now do as members of the global alliance the People's Health Movement⁶, we will get nowhere and we will have good reason to be ashamed of ourselves.

Kaare Norum, Pekka Puska, Jack Farquhar and Kraisid Tontisirin, heroes of public health nutrition in Norway, Finland, the USA and Thailand, will I think confirm that their successes have depended on alliances with civil society organisations that encouraged and radicalised them. Again dear friends and colleagues, if you know of one significant example to the contrary, please write a letter for publication in this journal.

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- 2 Allain A. *Fighting an Old Battle in a New World. How IBFAN Monitors the Baby Food Market*. Penang, Malaysia: IBFAN, 2005.
- 3 WHO. *The International Code on the Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes*. Geneva: WHO, 1981.
- 4 WHO/UNICEF. *The Global Strategy on Infant and Young Child Feeding*. Geneva: WHO, 2004.
- 5 CASH homepage: <http://www.actiononsalt.org.uk>.
- 6 *Global Health Watch 2005–2006. The People's Health Movement*. London: Zed Books, 2006.