

Commentary

The big picture

Esté Vorster, modest as ever, does not mention that she was a shaper of the Indaba Declaration. She also had a hand in the Bellagio Declaration, which was a product of the workshop meeting masterminded by Barry Popkin of the Population Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Carlos Monteiro of the University of São Paulo at the Rockefeller Center on Lake Como¹ just before the 2001 IUNS Congress in Vienna. And she is the big chief in South Africa of the next IUNS Congress to be held in Durban in 2005.

Public health nutrition is becoming interesting. We may be moving out of the miasma of technical fixation: the betrayal of public health by the Friedmaniacs, the evisceration of nutrition science by the Genomians, and the examination of its entrails by the Cochranic cultists who preach that nothing may be said or done until completion of the final blinded trial. Imagine Archie's yells of contempt and derision! How could a randomised controlled trial demonstrate that a basic cause of epidemic pneumoconiosis in South Wales half a century ago, was greedy private coal mine owners, and that an appropriate intervention was nationalisation of the pits and decent standards of occupational health²?

Public health nutrition is all about policy, and that means politics. The pendulum swings back. The Bellagio Declaration reinforced the findings of a 1995 Forum organised by Prakash Shetty, then at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine³, showing that the social, economic and political forces that transformed the first industrialised societies in the nineteenth century, and which remain the basic causes of epidemic chronic diseases in high-income countries, have with incredible speed also become epidemic in most middle- and low-income countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

There is no technical fix. On a population basis, the triple devastation of endemic or epidemic nutritional deficiency, infectious diseases, and chronic diseases, cannot even be tidied up by medical, surgical and other treatment. Primordial prevention, which is to say preservation of healthy environments and change of unhealthy environments, is the only rational and feasible approach⁴.

Like train crashes, deaths from evidently zoonotic dementia are rare, but impress politicians. By contrast, deaths from cancer and heart disease are common, but perceived as boring. But now, chronic disease shows. Rampant childhood obesity⁵ is a whole new ball of fatty acids. McDonalds and Coca-Cola have pressed the panic

button, and launched a campaign against junk food, which should win a greasy spoon award.

And it's not hard to imagine industry begging for regulation of their advertisements aimed at children. Why? Because if Philip Morris and other transnational manufacturers of energy-dense fatty and/or sugary food decided the option was being sued down to red bottom lines by armies of parents made militant by voracious lawyers, we can anticipate mass manufactured fatty and/or sugary foods and drinks bearing government warnings of obesity and thus of diabetes, heart disease and common cancers. Maybe also worldwide posters inspired by the Marlboro cowboy, of the Cisco Junk Food Kid, who dares to get burgered in a big boy's world.

In the midst of this mayhem, the World Health Organization is updating its 1990 report on 'Diet, Nutrition and Chronic Diseases'⁶, and a draft of the new report is accessible on the world wide web⁷, together with 118 comments including many from front organisations for those sections of the industry whose profits depend on mass manufacture of degraded, cheapened, energy-dense products. The new report adapts matrices originated by the World Cancer Research Fund in its 1997 report⁸, incorporating judgements of convincing, probable or possible causal relationships between exposure X and disease Y. Another feature of the new report, is its use of the concept of 'host' and 'vector' causes of disease developed by Boyd Swinburn of Deakin University in Melbourne, and thus the judgement that large portion sizes of processed foods and drinks is a probable cause of obesity⁹.

Which leads to the Indaba Declaration. Following a proposal by David Sanders of the University of the West Cape and by George and Estelle de Klerk of the South African Department of Health, it applies the UNICEF multi-level concept of immediate, underlying and basic causes not only to nutritional deficiency and infectious diseases, but also to chronic diseases. We are all comfortable with the concept that epidemic infections are caused not only by bugs but also by open drains and wars. And so now heart disease is revealed as having saturated fat as an immediate cause, the flogging off of school playgrounds as an underlying cause, and the creation of world food systems in the belief that animal foods are superior to plant foods as a basic cause. This approach should make reports on food, nutrition and health more readable and relevant.

As for me, now living and working in Brazil, my impression is that the queasiness of nutrition scientists

typically is rather like that of mariners sailing west from Iberia to an imagined India, at the end of the 15th century. The old maps don't fit the new facts.

As one of many examples, it is generally assumed that foods of animal origin are the best sources of vitamin A, and that populations who subsist on foods of plant origin are therefore likely to be short or deficient in vitamin A¹⁰. Hence the massive supplementation and fortification collaborations between UN agencies and industry. However, in Brazil at least, the richest sources of vitamin A are a vast variety of fruits and vegetables, most native, many of which must have been known to the original Brazilians, now unfortunately exterminated or displaced. Most of these are now little known even in Brazil¹¹. In the areas where vitamin A deficiency is endemic, palm and other fruits stuffed with vitamin A fall off the trees and are used by kids as footballs. Happily, FAO is now developing a regional and local vegetables and fruits programme. Who knows, some visiting experts might even climb out of their four-wheel drives and ask knowledgeable local people for information.

Meanwhile, Mark Wahlqvist in his role as President of IUNS has set up a task force on eco-nutrition, chaired by Rainer Gross, now head of nutrition at UNICEF, to consider environmental impact as an integral part of nutrition science. Other hotheads, following Michael Crawford of the Institute of Brain Chemistry in London, and Tony McMichael, now director of Australia's national centre of population health in Canberra, are applying evolutionary principles to nutrition; and there is a fascinating rumour circulating, that the committees that have been pondering the WHO/FAO standards for human protein requirements since the last report emerged in 1985, have taken into account the uniquely low protein content of human milk. Gosh! What next? A look at sustainable 'organic' farming systems?

Big picture stuff! Could it be that nutrition science will

recover its original vision? May it once again be accepted that the fate of nations is determined by what they eat? It was such thoughts that inspired the Indaba Declaration, agreed at a right time in a good place, and happily, welcomed by the World Health Organization. Looking further forward, the Durban Congress could indeed shift some paradigms.

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