

Editorial

Nutrition and the health of Europe's children

While the nutritional status of children in poor countries is frequently documented and the negative impact of malnutrition on survival and development is repeatedly highlighted, the nutritional status of Europe's children is less often discussed. Our children are usually assumed to be in a 'good nutritional state', but at a recent meeting in Rome, organised by *Kellogg's*, there was a fresh look at the dietary patterns and nutritional status of children and many important new issues were reviewed. Perhaps the starting point was the recognition that Europe is made up of many countries – over forty in fact – with an amazing diversity of cultures and economies. There are major differentials in household economies with 'well-off' communities living near 'poor communities' but, rather disappointingly, there is little systematic data to enable meaningful comparisons between and within communities. However the meeting identified important issues which need to be considered while planning to improve child and adult health through nutritional means.

Obesity is becoming increasingly prevalent, and although the precise causes and the detailed changes in body composition are still to be identified, patterns and possible risk factors were reviewed. The decrease in physical activity among children in many communities is disturbing. The importance of diet and weight bearing physical activity in developing a strong bone structure was identified. The wide range of factors inhibiting or promoting bone accretion were reviewed and the need for adequate calcium intake within an active lifestyle emphasised.

Dietary patterns vary enormously within the Region and children have strongly held beliefs about what are 'good' foods and 'bad' foods. A greater understanding of their culture is necessary if we are to understand and positively influence the reasons for food choice. The 'globalisation of childhood and youth' is already making a striking impact on many aspects of lifestyle and engaging in 'youth culture' is crucial if dietary change is to be achieved. There are widely differing patterns of eating among European families ranging from the traditional 'sit

down together' to 'eat something quickly and go'. There is very little information on the impact of contemporary eating patterns on dietary intake among children.

Dietary surveys show considerable differences in the intakes of individual nutrients, but there are few studies of biochemical status or how nutritional status relates to function and child development. Patterns of antioxidant intake appear to differ widely within the Region, but it is unclear how much these protect children against present and future ill health. Many countries have government agencies and civil organisations which promote the intake of certain types of foods; the impact of 'healthy diet' promotion within schools and communities was reviewed. The role of the food industry was examined demonstrating that new technologies including fortification and the development of convenient foods for school children have important influences on children's diet, but differences in legislation across Europe currently limit the potential for food technologies more widely.

The increasing interest among nutritionists in the importance of intrauterine nutrition in relation to adult degenerative disease has somehow sidelined the importance of childhood nutrition in relation to health, but there is increasing evidence that childhood diet and growth can modify 'programming' that is set up 'in utero'. Therefore, for many reasons this meeting was very timely. It pulled together some of the most recent data on the nutritional status of Europe's children and opened up the need to document the situation more clearly and develop increased knowledge of the functional importance of diet and body composition on the health and development of children. How much these can be, or should be, changed is not at present understood completely; this will need clarification if nutrition and health policies are to be 'evidence-based' rather than 'hypothesis-based', as at present.

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