

EDITORIAL

A wider view of nutrition

One of the difficulties for the experimental research scientist is that in order to make his or her mark at the so-called 'sharp end' in their chosen field there is a need to focus on a very narrow and restricted area of their overall discipline. The gibe about 'knowing more and more about less and less' is often directed with some truth at the researcher. We regularly receive what are, in fact, excellent papers describing some elegant piece of work which has been properly designed and executed with skill and imagination, and yet one is left with the feeling that neither the reason for doing the work nor how the results advance the subject of nutrition would be obvious to a nutritionist in another field. This reiterates a topic I have raised earlier, that it is important for authors to try to describe the background for their research and the significance of the results they have obtained in the wider context of the nutritional sciences. If a paper really does advance concepts in the nutritional sciences most if not all authors should be able to make their paper more accessible to the majority of nutritionists and other scientists who read the Journal.

I would be the first to accept that in the current state of research funding and the development of the nutritional sciences it is essential that the researcher has to develop an interest in the finer, more detailed areas of their fields and, therefore, to have a more restricted focus for their experimental work. The growth of the scientific literature is but one reason why a researcher who wishes to do some experimental work has to restrict his or her horizon. The growth of the literature, to which all journals contribute, concerns me considerably and is one reason why we have occasionally to reject a paper as being insubstantial in its contribution to knowledge. I find the concept of the 'least publishable unit' very disturbing and evidence of scientific publications becoming part of the appraisal system of researchers rather than the extension of knowledge.

Alongside the restricted focus essential for pushing a subject forward, I think that it is important for all researchers to look up from their own work once in a while and try to look at their work in the context of nutrition as a whole. I think an appropriate analogy is working on a jigsaw puzzle where the focus is on fitting the individual piece and then looking up to see how the whole picture is developing.

How best to get this occasional overview? One way, of course, is to read the reviews in *Nutrition Research Reviews*, but I suggest that another very good way is to attend an International Congress of Nutrition; the plenary sessions provide one with the real overview of how the subject is developing and the more specialized symposia provide a review of the state of the art in the various areas of nutrition. In virtually all sessions the focus is on looking forward so that one comes away with new ideas on how one's particular special interests relate to other currently developing areas. We all recognize that the most exciting new areas develop at the interfaces of current research and these meetings permit one to browse around picking up new ideas.

The most important benefits of all scientific meetings come from the informal discussions that such meetings generate. In my own case, I had the best introduction to the folates on a bus tour at one congress and at another I was able to save three years planned work simply by discussing what we had in mind with another worker in the field who had the same ideas. I wish I could persuade administrators that insistence on presenting a paper as a pre-condition for getting funding discounts the value of meeting people. That being said, giving a short communication or presenting a poster does serve to introduce you to the other participants.

The next International Congress is in Adelaide* in September 1993. Not only is Adelaide a beautiful venue, the programme promises to provide the participants with a very good overview of the Nutritional Sciences as a whole, with a range of symposia on all the growth areas.

For the benefit of your scientific development I would urge you to start working now on your case for attending.

D. A. T. SOUTHGATE

* Secretariat, CSIRO, Division of Human Nutrition, P.O. Box 10041, Gouger Street, Adelaide, South Australia 5000, Australia.