

## Nutrition and low-income families

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'Where can I buy inexpensive recipes to feed my family?' was the question (posed by a housewife whose husband was unemployed and who had three children), which set some lecturers in the Glasgow and West of Scotland College of Domestic Science into action. The question was asked at the time when our First Year Teachers in Training were carrying out in the kitchens an exercise which had been the practice for a number of years previously. Each student had to plan a week's meals for a family of five (father, mother and three children) on a limited amount of money. The best exercise in each section was carried out in practice, and the student was given the money to purchase the food for the meals she had chosen, the publication 'Household Food Consumption and Expenditure' (National Food Survey Committee, 1972) being used as a guide. When we were asked for help, these exercises were used as the basis for our initial advice, and soon the need for a booklet containing simple, inexpensive recipes became evident. Lecturers in the Food Studies Department spent many hours planning 3 consecutive weeks' meals and compiling a complete shopping list for each week. There is a number of recipes for soup, fish, meat, eggs, offal etc., and useful hints on nutrition and the planning and cooking of meals. The 3 weeks' meals were actually cooked by volunteer housewives whose families acted as control groups. At the end of the 3 week period, any foods left were noted and quantities deducted from the whole. The menus were found to be acceptable to the control group families.

These quantities were passed on to the Nutrition Department. The value of the 3-week shopping lists and food not eaten was calculated. The totals were divided by 21 to obtain the average family intake per d, as purchased. The individuals of the family were father, mother and three children, aged 7, 9 and 12. Their daily requirements of energy, protein, calcium, iron and vitamin C, as recommended by the Department of Health & Social Security (1969), were added together, and the totals used as the family unit. The comparison can be seen in Table 1.

There appears to be much more as purchased, but the condition of the food and wastage would reduce this to, we feel, a quite satisfactory balance.

We were pleased to find that most of the dishes were acceptable, as eating habits are hard to change and acceptability is most important. We aimed to give greater variety at low cost so the cost of cooking the food had also to be considered.

As our booklet went to the publishers the same lecturers decided that more practical help could be given to those mothers of families who were in the low

Table 1. *Comparison of a family's nutritional requirements with the nutritional value of food as purchased over a 3 week trial period*

(The family unit consisted of father, mother and children aged, 7, 9 and 12 years.)

	Protein g	Calcium g	Iron mg	Vitamin C mg	Energy	
					MJ	(kcal)
Daily requirement of family	301	2·800	55·0	128	50·3	(12 000)
Mean daily nutritional value of food bought	377	5·177	78·8	319	60·5	(14 454)

income bracket. Contact was made with the social worker through whom the request for inexpensive recipes was first received, and it was suggested that students might be of help in demonstrating suitable recipes, such as those in the booklet, if a selected audience could be arranged. The social worker agreed that this would be no problem and was able to send ten of his own clients who were receiving Social Security Benefit. The venue for the demonstration was a Home Economics room in a building in the town centre.

Two lecturers and four students drove to the centre carrying everything from two portable cookers to the last teaspoon. Our students demonstrated four dishes plus some baking each evening, and when the demonstrations were over, and the food served on the table, the mothers in the audience were encouraged to ask questions. They were in no way inhibited at question time; as one mother so aptly said, 'We are all in the same boat'. The lecturers took over at question time and subtly included some simple nutrition in answering the questions.

Preparation for the evening demonstrations was really hard work: the lecturers had to groom the students for their encounter with the public, and make sure that their information was sound, adequate and above all appropriate. There was no point in talking about liquidizers and electric hand mixers or in demonstrating with flashy equipment when some mother in the audience was about to have her electricity supply cut off because of arrears in payment. The exercise had to be realistic. A pilot scheme consisting of 3 weeks' demonstrations proved most successful and got much publicity in the Press and on television, which of course brought us many telephone calls and letters from Social Work departments requesting a similar series to be run in their areas. It must be remembered that the students and lecturers did this in their spare time, giving up lunch hours and evenings voluntarily to run the project, so the response to requests had to be limited.

It was, however, arranged with two centres that a start would be made in the autumn of this year, giving a series of six evening demonstrations. Thursday evening was the choice for both centres and audiences were limited to twelve, so each Thursday two lecturers and four students set out for each centre. The same recipes were demonstrated and the lecturer in charge of the project visited both centres each evening, and the following Monday at coffee break had a discussion about the previous Thursday's events.

Our students, all volunteers (there is still a waiting list of volunteers) were most enthusiastic about the project and lecturers found that the students got an excellent response from the mothers, who chatted to them quite freely.

The mothers who attended showed great interest: one young mother even brought her 6-month-old baby one evening; unfortunately, however, her drunken husband arrived on the scene and took her home. Lecturers found that the husbands in many instances were a drawback as they resented their wives going out to the demonstrations and they objected to change in their diet when their wives tried out some of the recipes. We were most encouraged when the mothers told us that they had tried out some of the recipes demonstrated. One evening we held a baking competition. The mothers were told to try out some of the baking in their own homes and bring in a sample. We had some excellent results: there were as many as twelve entries in one centre. Food prizes were given for the girdle and oven scones, pancakes and various buns handed in. We did not teach budgeting: we merely demonstrated nutritious meals, cooked correctly and economically, and also discussed current 'bargain buys'. We found a great dearth of knowledge in the cooking of vegetables: in fact, vegetables did not seem to feature on some mothers' shopping lists at all. We found that a lot of money was spent on 'sticky buns' in bakers' shops and no home baking done. The mothers made the excuse that they did not have the equipment, but we demonstrated that a frying pan (and that they all possessed!) could be used as a girdle, the grill pan could be used as a sponge tin or cake tin and their roasting tin could be used as a casserole. Improvisation was the key word!

The week following the last evening of the series, a party of seventy were entertained to dinner in the College. The guests included the Principal and Vice-Principal of the College, Directors of Social Work, social workers, homemakers, lecturers and students who took part in the demonstrations and the mothers who attended the demonstrations. The meal was cooked and served by third-year students, and mothers who were present thoroughly enjoyed their outing. One mother had never been out for a meal, so of course this was a wonderful thrill for her.

The greatest encouragement for lecturers and students came on the final evening, when one of the younger mothers expressed her disappointment that the demonstrations were over, as she had learned such a great deal, and added: 'We felt we would miss our Thursday night outing so we have arranged to carry on ourselves and mean to cook and bake in one of our homes each week.' This was the enthusiasm we had hardly dared hope for! 'Follow-up' work will be difficult but one good suggestion from a lecturer, that we send on an interesting recipe to them periodically, will probably be one way of keeping in touch. It has also been arranged that a number of their children will be taken by social workers to the coast in spring or early summer so some of our lecturers and students hope to go and cook and help generally.

The above is probably very different from the usual content of this journal, but there is a desperate need for the low-income families to be helped in a practical way, and the above is how we interpreted the situation and responded to the need.

## REFERENCES

- Department of Health & Social Security (1969). *Recommended Intakes of Nutrients for the United Kingdom*. London: H.M. Stationery Office.
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