

## Introduction: Acquisition of food-related behaviours in children: critical windows for later health. An international pre-FENS congress symposium, Paris July 9<sup>th</sup>, 2007

The children of Europe, like those of most other parts of the world, are experiencing rapid changes in their lifestyle conditions. Numerous varieties of palatable foods are now available at all times in all places, or nearly so. In parallel, young people of today are increasingly attracted by an unprecedented number of "small screen" activities: television is now competing with the computer and video games to keep children's attention busy for hours in mental activities that are incompatible with physical activity. As an expected result of the increase in energy intake plus the decrease in energy expenditure, the frequency of overweight and obesity is increasing rapidly in European youths. The Danone International Institute, whose activities often deal with child health, has gathered a group of experts from many parts of Europe and the world, in order to help us share experiences and ideas about this critically important public health problem.

The program of this one-day symposium was built so as to address many factors that might affect a child's ability to maintain a healthy body weight and cover nutrient needs during growth. Attention was paid to events that occur before a child is born. Genetic and epigenetic factors were explored, including the important influences affecting foetal development. Recent data about the sensory and nutrient factors influential during first few hours and days of the new-born child were examined. Parental behaviour was examined, with a strong emphasis on the child-mother interaction. Other influences (cognitive, affective, environmental, etc.) were also addressed as they shape the growing child's food choices, likes and dislikes, and ability to adjust energy intake to energy needs.

The invited speakers are internationally respected experts of different aspects of healthy growth. Each of them contributed an original perspective to the numerous nutritional problems associated with growth, particularly but not exclusively body weight control. The organisers' hope was that this unique event would give the audience a chance to appreciate the immense and multi-faceted effort now devoted to solving the many nutrition-related problems in our children. Speakers were asked, after exposing the main recent findings in their own discipline, to propose a few ideas to improve nutrition and growth in children living under the unprecedented circumstances of today: easy access to palatable high energy density foods, plus decreasing occasions for physical activity. The final goal is to interrupt, and then hopefully

to reverse the present epidemics of nutrition-related health problems in children, in order to allow our children to grow into healthy adults and enjoy a long, pleasant, active and useful life.

This one-day symposium obviously did not and could not possibly cover all the critical factors affecting child nutrition and health. Considerations about birth weight and dietary imbalance at weaning, among other important topics, were not addressed in our one-day meeting. It is clear that other topics and other speakers could have been included. Hopefully, such contributions will be integrated into the programmes of future Danone Institute symposia. The choice of speakers in the present symposium was guided by simple principles: well recognized experts, different areas of expertise, different areas of Europe and the rest of the developed world. The organisers are perfectly aware that their particular choice of speakers left important areas untouched and that other viewpoints are critical to consider. Nevertheless, we hope that the present set of papers will contribute to the broader debate about child health and development by presenting an original juxtaposition of expert views.

The final chapter of this special issue of the BJN will be devoted to practical advice to improve child nutrition and health based on the speakers' individual contributions. Such advice looks attractive on paper. In order to make it useful, it has to be put into practice, evaluated and improved when necessary. This represents more research, more data, and more scientific assessment. It also requests changes in our present lifestyle, particularly changes in societal influences and education. The field of child health and growth is one very privileged area in which science can make a critical input on long-term consequences. The initiative taken by the International Danone Institute of bringing together scientists of various background and expertise is thus a judicious and important step in this crucial mission of science.

France Bellisle

*INSERM U557/INRA U1125/CNAM EA3200/Univ Paris 13  
Centre de Recherche en Nutrition Humaine d'Ile-de France  
Unité de Recherche en Épidémiologie Nutritionnelle*

*SMBH*

*74 rue Marcel Cachin*

*Bobigny cedex 93017*

*France*

*f.bellisle@uren.smbh.univ-paris13.fr*