

# EDITORIAL:

## NUTRITION SCENE IN MALAYSIA

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Nutrition research has now progressed to the point where much is known about the foods we eat and their relation to health. The body is, broadly speaking, the product of its nutrition as exemplified by the saying: "you are what you eat". What we eat can therefore have a major influence on biological processes, health and well-being.

Malnutrition although more widespread amongst those who are socio-economically disadvantaged is not necessarily a disease of poverty. Malnutrition is also found in developed societies and is often brought about through poor food habits and ignorance of food requirements for different physiological groups and circumstances. For instance, the nutritional requirements of an infant, a toddler, schoolboy, pregnant mother, labourer, sedentary office worker or an elderly pensioner are not the same.

Recent indicators and proxy indicators of nutrition for Malaysia such as toddler mortality, incidence of low birthweight, life expectancy at birth and food balance sheet statistics suggest a favourable and an improving nutrition situation at the macro level.<sup>1</sup> However nutritional studies conducted at the local level, indicate that there are still a considerable amount of protein-calorie malnutrition, iron deficiency, anaemia and vitamin

A deficiency.<sup>2-5</sup> Endemic goitre, a deficiency disease whose prevention by iodised salt was advocated by the French Chemist, Boussingault more than a hundred and fifty years ago can still be found in the interior of the Peninsula, Sarawak and Sabah.<sup>6,7</sup>

In striking contrast, chronic diseases associated with dietary excesses and the country's increasing affluence, such as coronary heart disease, hypertension and cancers have now emerged as the country's major killers to assume public health importance.<sup>8</sup>

Malaysia has had a long-standing history of nutrition research. In fact, two former directors of the Institute for Medical Research (IMR), Henry Fraser (Director from 1906 – 1916) and Thomas Stanton (Director from 1920 – 1926) contributed to the discovery that beri-beri was a disease of dietary origin.<sup>9</sup> Through the two World Wars, the post-Merdeka era and until the early 1970's, the IMR remained the principal centre for nutrition research in the country.

It is gratifying to note that there are now in addition, several university departments and institutions that are involved in nutrition research and training such as the Department of Social and Preventive Medicine, University of Malaya, the Department of Community Health, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (National University of Malaysia), the Faculty of Food Science and Technology and the Department of Human Development, Universiti Pertanian (Agricultural University), Department of Food Science and

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Most states of Malaysia including Sabah and Sarawak employ a state nutrition officer who works closely with the Maternal and Child Health Unit of the Ministry of Health which has contributed greatly to the nutritional well-being of mothers, infants and pre-school children of the country.

Our paediatricians from both the Universities and the Government sectors have also kept themselves on the forefront of the nutrition scene by maintaining an active interest in paediatric nutrition and research. On 4 August 1985, the 5th Asian Congress of Paediatrics Pre-Congress Symposium on Childhood Nutrition, held appropriately in the IMR, attracted a large and attentive audience who came to listen to eminent local and foreign paediatricians/nutritionists lecture on a range of topics that included breastfeeding, infant nutrition, weaning foods and nutrition as part of primary health care.

There is also no lack of concern by the Malaysian public and consumer groups on issues related to nutrition and the diet as illustrated by the recent widespread publicity given by the mass media to non-nutritive foods sold in school canteens. Unfortunately the divergence of opinions expressed often served to create misunderstanding and confusion. It is therefore timely that the Nutrition Society of Malaysia, whose formation has been overdue for some years, was finally approved for registration on September 1985. It is hoped that the Society will be able to influence and shape public opinion on nutritional issues as one of the Society's objectives is to inform and acquaint the public and the Government on matters related to food and nutrition.

Two recent Government actions that have an important bearing on the nutritional health of Malaysians came into effect last year, namely, the Food Regulations 1985<sup>10</sup> and the Agricultural Policy. The Food Regulations are concerned with the wholesomeness of food, its safety and quality for the protection of the health of consumers

while a major objective of the Agricultural Policy is to ensure adequate food production and supplies for the country's needs. Both the Food Regulations and the Agricultural Policy can also be expected to exert an important economic impact especially on the food and agricultural industries.

It is now considered that nutrition information through nutritional counselling and education or through well-presented feature articles in the mass media offers a great potential for diet improvement or modification aimed at reduction of undernutrition or overnutrition. This is exemplified by the recent sharp decline in mortality rates of coronary heart disease in the USA where it is now thought that the decline is due mainly to public awareness and attention given to changes in the diet and lifestyle, especially to the lowering of serum cholesterol and cessation of cigarette smoking.<sup>11,12</sup>

Clearly, the medical doctors, nutrition scientists and public health professionals all have a role to play in educating the public for the prevention of malnutrition and the reduction of morbidity due to chronic illnesses where prevention is feasible for the further improvement of the quality of life and life expectancy.

## REFERENCES

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