

# Conference Notes

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## Malnutrition and Food Habits

*Summary of a Conference at Cuernavaca, Mexico, September 9-14, 1960.*

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IN RECENT years, as the control of communicable disease has improved, the significance of malnutrition has emerged more clearly. The need to understand its causes has become urgent; without this understanding there can be no secure foundation for schemes of prevention.

It is now evident that in many countries malnutrition is largely responsible for the high rate of mortality, especially in children one to four years old. The combination of disease and malnutrition, the one precipitating and perpetuating the other, has a devastating effect in this age group.

Fortunately there is also evidence that improvements in nutrition (and in housing and hygiene) are more effective against the mortality of this older group than against the infant mortality. It is reasonable, therefore, to concentrate upon this group much of the resources of money and personnel that are available for public health work in nutrition.

Various forms of malnutrition as well as general undernourishment are found throughout the world. It has been amply demonstrated, however, by surveys carried out by national and international teams that the most serious and widespread deficiency disease found today is protein-calorie malnutrition in young children. This condition, a state of ill-health found where diets are habitually poor in protein while the calorie intake may vary from gross inadequacy to higher levels, is known by different names in many parts of the world. The severe form, incidentally, in which protein is markedly deficient, is now generally referred to as "kwashiorkor," the name given to the syndrome when it was first described some twenty-five years ago by Dr. Cicely Williams.

The public health significance of protein-calorie malnutrition is twofold, direct and indirect. For each child with frank kwashiorkor in a given area, there may be many others less obviously affected but whose growth and development and resistance to the intercurrent diseases of childhood have become impaired. The malnourished child has little resistance to the common infections, which therefore frequently end in death. This probably explains why the case

mortality in certain infectious diseases in children may be 100 to 200 times greater in those areas in which malnutrition is prevalent than in those in which it is rare.

Protein-calorie malnutrition is therefore a serious and worldwide public health problem. The specialized agencies of the UN (FAO and WHO with material assistance from UNICEF) have used their unique international facilities to stimulate interest in and spread knowledge about this important nutritional disease.

One activity has been the organization of conferences at which authorities on different aspects of the problem and on related problems, could come together and exchange their knowledge and experience. Two conferences sponsored by the Specialized Agencies and the Josiah Macy Jr. Foundation took place a year or two ago. The first (1953) dealt with kwashiorkor, and the second (1955) with "Human Protein Requirements and their Fulfilment in Practice." A third (sponsored by the Josiah Macy Jr. Foundation and the World Federation for Mental Health, and supported by the International Agencies concerned with malnutrition) was held in Cuernavaca, Mexico, in September 1960. The problems related to the changes in food habits which will have to take place if people are going to make better use of the resources already available, or accept and use a new food, were considered at this meeting.

There is already enough scientific knowledge to bring about considerable improvement in the nutritional health of children in many parts of the world if it could be widely applied. This knowledge cannot, however, be used where it is needed unless the people themselves want to use it, know how to do so, and are prepared to accept the particular and related changes necessary to the establishment of a better nutritional pattern. Unfortunately, there appear to be psychological, sociological and cultural factors which create barriers against rapid changes in food habits, and which are less well understood than the impersonal aspects of nutrition and malnutrition.

At the conference in Cuernavaca on "Malnutrition and Food Habits," nutrition research workers, pediatricians, public health workers interested in nutritional education and members of the Secretariats of the international organizations sought the help of anthropologists, psychiatrists and social psychologists of wide experience, in elucidating the human factors involved in changing food habits.

Case studies of the problem as it is found in parts of Africa, India and Guatemala presented by Dr. R. F. A. Dean (Director, Medical Research Council Infant Malnutrition Unit, Kampala); Dr. K. Someswara Rao (Deputy Director, Indian Council for Medical Research, New Delhi); and Dr. Nevin Scrimshaw (Director, Nutrition Institute for Central America and Panama, Guatemala), showed the wide variation in social, psychological and economic factors which contribute to the prevalence of protein malnutrition, and condition the form and acceptance of preventive measures.

A day spent at Tlaltizapan, a rural center, brought into focus some of the practical difficulties the nutrition worker meets. There (under the direction of Dr. F. Gomez, Director, Hospital Infantil Mexico), a team of doctors, nurses and social workers are carrying out an intensive study of the beliefs, ideas and practices of the people in order to discover the most suitable approaches to the nutritional improvement of the community. Many of the conditions found in this Mexican village were familiar to most of the participants, nutrition workers from very different parts of the world, and provided a common background to the subsequent discussions.

In a review of the processes involved in culture change, and the lessons learned from the past and from the postwar development of cooperation between nutritionists and social scientists, Dr. Margaret Mead (Associate Curator, American Museum of Natural History) added perspective as well as thought-provoking observations from her own experience of different cultures. Dr. A. T. M. Wilson (Special Adviser, Unilever) applied a psychiatrist's knowledge of the universal human needs and equally universal differences to the question of nutritional change, particularly in relation to the apathetic individual apparently resistant to change, and to the ways in which opinion is formed and changed in a community. He also compared the extensive re-

search and organization deemed necessary in the business world when attempting to change food habits through the process of marketing a new product, with the procedures usually adopted by other agencies.

The social psychologist's experience of market research, attitude and opinion surveys and motivational studies was presented by Dr. J. Stoetzel (Professor of Social Psychology, the Sorbonne, Paris) who also discussed the importance, in the acceptance and rejection of any food, of the "image" presented by that food to the individual.

Realization of the immensely complicated nature of the problem of improving nutritional health was reflected in the different disciplines represented at the conference, and by the discussions themselves. Although some nutritional deficiencies, such as goiter or pellagra, are amenable to action on a national basis, the relief of protein deficiency in children depends ultimately on the voluntary cooperation of the individual family.

Government policy, agricultural practices, the economics of the family, the way food is distributed within the family, the beliefs about what the father or the mother or the child should eat, and many other factors have to be taken into account before any nutrition improvement can be planned. The education required to make any plan effective must be equally comprehensive in its approach, and include also a detailed knowledge of the social and human elements which decide the actions of the individual parent in a given community. The conference recognized and discussed the difficulties inherent in acquiring both the knowledge necessary for such planning and the personnel and skills necessary for long continuing stage-by-stage progress, and made some suggestions as to how these difficulties might be met.

Under the chairmanship of Dr. Otto Klineberg (Professor of Social Psychology, Columbia University, New York) each of the forty participants took every possible opportunity to express their particular point of view, and many aspects of the total problem of malnutrition and food habits, not mentioned in this brief report, were discussed. A fuller report will be published by FAO early in 1961, and should be of much interest and use to nutrition workers everywhere.

