

Symposium on Overnutrition

Foreword

THE modern era of nutrition has been marked by the discovery of a host of nutrients required by the body and a corresponding number of deficiency syndromes. The past half century has seen the number of essential nutrients increase from a paltry dozen to approximately forty. It has been an exciting development. The possibilities of preventing disease by diet—not only nutritional disease but other diseases, too—has stirred the imagination, and enthusiasm has grown to make sure that everyone had enough and to spare. The task of meeting nutritional requirements is by no means accomplished. There are large segments of the world, the so-called “technically underdeveloped” countries, where undernutrition is an acute and most pressing problem. In the well developed countries, however, and in the upper economic groups of any population, evidence is accumulating that we may have overshot the mark. Clear-cut deficiency disease is a rarity; what passes for it is often highly questionable.

The life insurance companies were the first to call our attention to the possibilities of overnutrition. Their statistical data revealed that overweight increased the mortality from heart disease and cancer, and underweight decreased the risk of succumbing to these conditions. Caloric overnutrition is now generally recognized as undesirable, but the possibilities of overnutrition with specific nutrients have only recently received attention.

Although definite conclusions in this area must await further work, there is both experimental and suggestive clinical evidence which suggests that we should watch our intake of protein, saturated fat, certain minerals (such as calcium and iron) and some of our vitamins, especially the fat-soluble vitamins. The possibility of remote effects is one that requires serious thought. There is much concern in adult medicine about the



etiology of atherosclerosis, a condition which seems to be definitely related to nutrition and probably to overnutrition, although the exact factors are matters of dispute. It is of interest, therefore, to learn that this disease has its roots in childhood. If it is a nutritional problem, it is therefore a pediatric nutritional problem.

Even though knowledge about overnutrition is in its infancy, it is important for the pediatrician to keep abreast of it. The contributors to this symposium have kindly consented to help us out in this regard.

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