

Nutrition leadership



NutriScene
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Leadership skills urgently needed to effectively implement nutrition programmes.

THE strengthening of nutrition expertise and operational capacity within countries at all levels is fundamental to the successful implementation of identified nutrition programmes.

Leadership training is an important component of capacity strengthening efforts for increasing effectiveness of nutrition programmes.

I participated as one of the resource persons in an international workshop on *Leadership Skills in Nutritional Sciences* in Hyderabad, India, in mid November 2007. I would like to share with readers some highlights of discussions in that workshop. I take this opportunity to emphasise the urgent need for capacity strengthening to effectively implement programmes identified in the National Plan of Action for Nutrition Malaysia II (NPANM II) (2006-2015).

Global efforts in capacity strengthening in nutrition

Strengthening local capacity to address food and nutrition problems has been recognised as a key area for action in order to improve nutrition worldwide.

This is fundamental to attaining sustainable nutrition policies. There has also been a call for a coherent global approach to capacity building. The International Union of Nutritional Sciences (IUNS) and the United Nations University (UNU), in collaboration with various regional planning groups, have planned to undertake local capacity building efforts in Latin America, Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Eastern Europe.

This particular workshop in India was the collaborative effort of the National Institute of Nutrition (NIN) in Hyderabad, the Nutrition Society of India (NSI) and the IUNS.

The two-day workshop had several presentations by guest lecturers from within and outside India to provide participants with updated information on selected topics in nutrition and lessons learned from implementation of programmes. The 38 participants from various organisations and parts of India also participated in group activities and discussions.

I made a presentation on developing leadership skills in food regulatory affairs, aimed at illustrating that a nutritionist can contribute effectively to activities related to such food regulations.

I provided an overview of my role as nutrition consultant to the Ministry of Health Malaysia, summarising my involvement in the area of Malaysian Food Regulations as well as in nutrition-related activities of Codex Alimentarius.

Through such personal experiences, I had hoped to inspire young nutritionists to work in this area. They can either be in the private sector (eg regulatory affairs manager in food companies) or in public organisations (eg Ministry of Health).

Capacity strengthening identified in NPANM II

The National Plan of Action for Nutrition Malaysia II (NPANM II) (2006-2015) (NutriScene 8 July 2007) has clearly emphasised that the infrastructure, human resource, financial status, training and research activities in nutrition should be adequate in order to realise the goals of the National Nutrition Policy.

One of the five facilitating strate-



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gies identified in NPANM II is the strengthening of institutional capacity in nutritional activities. The Plan further elaborated the following three main activities for this strategy:

1. Set up a committee/Technical Working Group (TWG) to review all aspects of the current agency and institutional capacity in nutrition activities.

2. Strengthen the nutrition capacity in all relevant institutions within the Ministry of Health Malaysia (including Family Health Development Division, Food Safety and Quality Division, Institute for Medical Research and Public Health Institute).

3. Advocate for employing more nutritionists in relevant ministries and industries dealing with food, nutrition and fitness.

I would urge these activities to be immediately carried out. These are prerequisites for the effective implementation of the identified NPANM II activities. I would highlight two particular areas for focus, ie in the area of public health nutrition and research.

Capacity strengthening in public health

The Ministry of Health has placed nutritionists throughout the country. Over the years, the number of such public health nutritionists have increased.

In some states, more than one nutritionist has been stationed to meet the needs of conducting various nutrition-related activities for the communities. It is hoped that every district will eventually have at least one nutritionist.

All urban and rural communities must have access to nutritionists to gain appropriate nutrition information. Implementing the NPANM II will need the full strength of trained nutritionists for the various activities. We must continue to emphasise that prevention is the key to reducing the nation's burden of chronic diseases and also nutritional deficiencies.

Needless to say, continuing professional development will then need to follow to ensure nutritionists remain updated and relevant.

I note there are various group meetings organised for these state nutritionists. Besides strengthening networking within this group, I do hope that there would be opportunities for discussions and interactions with nutritionists from other sectors, including researchers, academia and the private sector.

Strengthening nutrition research capability

Another vital area for capacity improvement in the country is nutrition research.

The Institute for Medical Research (IMR) was the first medical research institution in the country. Nutrition research was formally established in the IMR in the 1960s.

A decade later, other nutrition research facilities were established, especially in the Malaysian Agricultural Research and Development Institute (MARDI), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) and Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM).

Community nutrition research has been the main thrust of the research activities in institutions. We urgently need to strengthen our research capability in clinical nutrition.

Over the years, nutrition research capability in academia has advanced significantly. Many more universities were established and several have nutrition and dietetics programmes.

Nutrition remains a high priority in health promotion and disease prevention in the country. NPANM II has been developed specifically to achieve and maintain optimal nutritional well-being of Malaysians.

Promoting continuous research and development is one of the facilitating strategies identified in the Plan. Since IMR is the research arm of the Ministry of Health Malaysia, it is imperative that nutrition research be high on the research agenda of the Institute. The first candidate for capacity strengthening would be the nutrition unit of the IMR.

Involve nutritionists in food regulatory system

A strong food regulatory system is of primary importance to ensure safe food supplies to the population and the prevention of fraudulent trade practices. It is also important to improve the export potential of local produce so that they can compete in international trade.

This has become increasingly important with the rapid rise in food manufacturing activities as communities consume more processed foods. This is also true with globalisation and as international trade becomes more important. Even for agricultural produce (eg fish and meat), a food regulatory system has to be in place to ensure safe supplies of these foods.

This need is further driven by increased interest in nutrition label and nutrition and health claims all across the globe. For obvious reasons, the food industry would like to highlight nutrients contained in their products and make claims regarding the nutrients or components contained therein.

At the same time, nutrition information on food packages may help consumers in making better choice of foods.

Leadership training in nutrition

Young graduates will be equipped with knowledge in food and nutrition. They would have learnt from textbooks on how to overcome food and nutrition problems.

However, leadership, communications and advocacy skills are often neglected in undergraduate as well as graduate training programmes. Good leadership skill is more important than having in-depth knowledge of food and nutrition.

Good leaders are able to form teams and establish effective networks that will lead to effective implementation of nutrition programmes. They must have good advocacy skills to "sell" their programmes and convince partners to collaborate effectively.

Communication skills are important to convey nutrition messages effectively to the community.

The present batch of senior nutrition scientists in the country have reached official retirement age. In most organisations, a second echelon of nutritionists, many with PhDs, are in place.

A PhD is certainly not a guarantee that he is going to be an effective leader or researcher. Capacity strengthening of nutrition institutions identified in NPANM II should include leadership skill training for these future

leaders. Skills required would include advocacy for strong support and close collaboration from allied sectors (eg agriculture, education, social welfare); effective interaction with others in establishing teams and networks; and effective communication to policy makers and politicians.

A long-term systematic, coordinated programme has to be in place. The setting up of the TWG identified in the NPANM II would be an essential first step. We should start working now.

■ *NutriScene is a fortnightly column by Dr Tee E Siong, who pens his thoughts as a nutritionist with over 30 years of experience in the research and public health arena. For further information, e-mail starhealth@thestar.com.my. The information provided is for educational and communication purposes only and it should not be construed as personal medical advice. Information published in this article is not intended to replace, supplant or augment a consultation with a health professional regarding the reader's own medical care. The Star does not give any warranty on accuracy, completeness, functionality, usefulness or other assurances as to the content appearing in this column. The Star disclaims all responsibility for any losses, damage to property or personal injury suffered directly or indirectly from reliance on such information.*