

Feeding our schools



School canteen food is under scrutiny, yet again.

WHEN I was in primary school (many, many years ago, of course), they were called tuckshops. Now known as school canteens, these are run by private vendors and are a part of every school in the country.

Food sold in school canteens has been in the news in recent weeks, yet again. Some quarters complain about the lack of quality and safety of canteen foods. Some causes were highlighted and some solutions discussed. The topic is forgotten for a while. After some months, the issue of school canteen food resurfaces.

The issue of foods sold to fill little tummies in schools has always been close to my heart. I first highlighted the poor nutritional quality of school canteen foods in 1979.

In that presentation, I had expressed the hope that my paper would bring about greater awareness on the importance of looking into the nutritive value of canteen food.

Over the years, there certainly has been increased awareness. However, things do not appear to have improved very much over the last three decades.

Snacking and school canteens

Snacking is a common practice of our children, including school children, whether they are from rural or urban areas. Among school children, snacking too has been and will remain to be a part of school life.

Snacking between meals may contribute to some intake of nutrients, particularly for children who do not have an adequate breakfast before going to school. Such snacking may help to sustain the child through the long morning in school. Snacks may provide a quick source of energy, although as the main source of food, many of them are expensive and inadequate nutritionally.

It is a habit that started a long way back in our communities. Rather than trying to remove the habit, it is perhaps more worthwhile to cash in on this habit.

It is however important to examine what kinds of foods are being purchased as snack foods by our school children, particularly those in primary schools.

The school child often gets some pocket money to bring to school to buy food in the canteen. Even the poorest of the children do not wish to be left behind. During recess, the children flock out of the classrooms into the canteens. What choices do they have in these canteens? How do they make their choices? Do parents advise them what to buy with the money they have? What are the main factors influencing their choice? Obviously there is plenty of



unhappiness with the types of foods sold in school canteens. There are reports of too much hard candies (sweets) being sold, as well as fruit preserves and pickles, sweetened ices and drinks.

There are just too many types of fried foods and snacks (*goreng pisang*, *curry puff*, fried dishes). Packets and packets of processed extruded snacks of numerous flavours are available. As exceptions, you may find some stalls selling wholesome freshly cooked foods and hot meals such as a bowl of *mee* or plate of rice; or green bean soup, red bean *pau* or *tofu fah* as snacks; or neatly cut and wrapped fresh fruits.

Indeed, the foods offered for sale in a school canteen are far from what a nutritionist would recommend for healthy eating.

The issues at hand

Parents lament the lack of control on the types of foods sold in school canteens. There are guidelines on the types of foods that may be sold in canteens. There are foods that are encouraged, those that are not encouraged and some that are not permitted. There are guidelines on setting up of school committees to monitor the types of foods sold. The guidelines also include inspection of school premises in relation to cleanliness.

So, why has it been difficult to have greater control? Why are the guidelines not implemented? Is converting some guidelines into regulations the way to go? I guess too many other factors come into play in the school canteens.

Some vendors claim that they are merely selling what the children love to buy. According to these vendors, few children would ask for a boring green bean soup or a piece of cut papaya. Or a bowl of fish ball *mee-hoon*. These are stuff that they would be asked to eat when their mothers are with them.

Here in the canteens, it is freedom to choose what they want!

Others will argue that if we remove the temptations of the undesirable snacks, children will have no choice but take the healthier alternatives.

There are also vendors who retort that even if they don't sell such snacks in school canteens, there are so many vendors on wheels just outside the school gates. These are easily available to the school children across the fencing. They say it is not fair to just clamp down on the foods sold in canteens.

I also read press reports of individuals complaining of "junk food" being sold in school canteens. When I read further on into the report, I find that they are referring to food with non-permitted food additives such as colours and preservatives.

Selling food of poor nutritional value (or junk food, according to some people) is a totally different issue from selling foods containing illegal food additives. The latter types of foods should not be on sale at all as they contravene the Food Regulations 1985. Whereas for the former, as long as the foods do not contravene food regulations, it is not possible for the Health Ministry to take legal action.

Then there are occasional reports of food poisoning within the school compounds, either in canteens or hostels. This is again a different issue from my focus in this write-up. I am sure the local health authorities and the Food Safety and Quality Division of Ministry of Health has taken the necessary action to tackle the problem.

Schools and canteens are ideal for promoting healthy eating

Healthy eating should commence from a young age. Healthy eating habits should be inculcated early in life. Schools could be an ideal channel for promoting healthy eating.

The school curriculum already has components for teaching food and nutrition to pupils. However,

School canteens can be appropriate channels for nutrition education.

because these are not examination subjects, less attention has been given to teaching them.

It is really important to emphasise that good nutrition is the basic prerequisite for a healthy, active child, who is then able to excel in all aspects of school activities. We cannot wait for a person to be 30 years old before giving him nutrition advice. This is because the ill effects of chronic diseases like obesity, diabetes, hypertension and heart disease start from young. This is why good eating habits must be nurtured from young.

School canteens can be appropriate channels for nutrition education. Foods sold in canteens must be in line with the principles of healthy eating.

We cannot preach healthy eating in the classroom and selling non-nutritious foods in the canteens. Canteens must not be the place for posters for advertising foods and snacks. Messages for nutrition education must take their place. These can include posters, food models and other educational aids for promoting healthy eating.

Many other activities for promoting healthy eating in schools, including those involving school canteens, can be undertaken.

We need positive actions

I do hope that there can be more concerted efforts to resolve the issue of selling safe and nutritious foods in school canteens. I realise it is no simple matter and several parties are involved.

The school authorities, the parent-teachers association, the teachers, the parents, besides others, all must work together towards the intended goal.

All stakeholders must first agree that it is an important enough issue to tackle. All must agree that firm positive actions need to be taken immediately. A lot can be done, if the relevant parties concerned are

convinced, are convicted, are determined to do so.

The canteen food issue cannot be tackled in isolation. A holistic approach to nutrition education and promotion to school authorities, parents, teachers and pupils must be carried out at the same time.

We need not start from the drawing board to tackle the issue. The National Plan of Action for Nutrition of Malaysia II (2006-2015) (highlighted in *NutriScene* of July 8, 2007) has identified several activities targeted at school children, including the school canteens.

These include carrying out growth monitoring for all school children; establishing surveillance system for school children; implementing and enforcing the school canteen guidelines (revised in 2004); ensuring access to affordable, safe and nutritious food in schools; and promoting availability of healthy food choices in school canteens.

We need to put the canteen issue to rest, once and for all.

■ 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.

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