



**Nutri
Scene**
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One of our country's strategies to achieve and maintain optimal nutritional wellbeing of Malaysians is through promoting healthy eating and active living.

In the July 8 instalment of *NutriScene* this year, I provided a broad overview of the master blueprint for nutrition programmes and activities for the next 10 years or so, the National Plan of Action for Nutrition of Malaysia (NPANM) II (2006-2015). The general objective of NPANM II is to achieve and maintain optimal nutritional wellbeing of Malaysians.

To ensure effective implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the Plan of Action, strategies of the Plan are oriented into the Foundation Strategy, the 5 Enabling and 5 Facilitating Strategies.

For each of the above strategies, various activities were identified, each with its estimated time frame, performance indicators, targets and implementing agency.

I did indicate in that write-up that I will be elaborating on some of the strategies more relevant to public health nutrition in future write-ups of *NutriScene*.

For this article, I will elaborate one of the enabling strategies, namely "promoting healthy eating and active living". I will touch on the main activities identified in the NPAN II, and point out the identified performance indicators and suggestions for the implementing agencies.

I will provide additional notes on each of these activities, including the rationale for these identified activities, my own thoughts on these approaches and the challenges to be expected.

Intensify healthy eating programmes

My very first instalment of *NutriScene* slightly over a year ago had focused on healthy eating programmes in this country. In that article, I had summarised the healthy lifestyle campaigns that have been carried out in this country.

The first was launched in 1991 with the theme "Love Your Heart". This was to give emphasis to the importance of reducing risk to coronary heart disease through various approaches, including healthy eating.

Subsequently, the healthy lifestyle campaigns were launched with a different theme every year, aimed at reducing risk of the people to chronic diseases, including diabetes and cancers.

Healthy eating has always been one of the strategies in these campaigns, giving due recognition to the importance of food and nutrition in the causation and prevention of these diseases.

After 15 years of these campaigns as well as promotional activities of other organisations, including those of the Nutrition Society of Malaysia, I would say that the knowledge of the public on food and nutrition has increased.

I would however argue that behavioural change has not taken place. I must say that many people have not translated their nutrition knowledge into healthier eating habits.

I am therefore fully supportive of this NPAN II activity to intensify healthy eating programmes. I am pleased to note that the Technical Working Group for Nutrition Promotion has been formed to undertake this task.

The Plan had indicated that besides the Ministry of Health, professional bodies (for example, the Nutrition Society of Malaysia) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are urged to collaborate in such promotional

Eat well, live well

efforts. The number of targeted healthy eating-related activities would be monitored.

I suppose a major challenge would be to garner the support of various organisations and to determine how to collaborate or synergise efforts in this direction. I presume the technical working group will be mapping out strategies and activities in line with its terms of reference. The ultimate challenge would include ensuring that the messages reach the intended target groups to bring about better eating habits.

Educate healthcare providers, pre-school teachers and care givers on appropriate nutritional care for vulnerable groups

NPAN II has identified several groups as particularly nutritionally vulnerable. These include the elderly, orphans, pregnant women, infants and pre-school children. The proposed activity aims to equip persons taking care of these vulnerable groups with the appropriate nutrition knowledge. Several sub-activities were identified in the Plan:

- Produce educational materials for target groups
- Disseminate information to target groups and care givers/child minders
- Develop training modules
- Conduct training
- To develop and review the institutional menus

The indicators to be monitored would be the number of nutrition educational materials, training modules, menus produced as well as the number of target groups and care-givers provided with such training.

The challenge would be to organise and conduct the series of activities identified, including carrying out the training sessions.

I presume the proposed training would be simple, short courses that would include topics such as the nutritional needs of vulnerable groups, meeting these needs and looking out for nutritional problems. The number of such courses that are required, especially for pre-school teachers, is phenomenal. In addition, appropriate educational materials have to be developed.

Various agencies and organisations have been identified to jointly carry out the activities outlined.

They include the Ministry of Health (MOH), Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (MWF&CD), Ministry of Rural and Regional Development (MRRD), Ministry of Education (MOE) and relevant NGOs (e.g. AIDS Council).

Carry out consultations with the food industry to develop a wider variety of healthy food choices

It has always been emphasised that the food industry could and should contribute to efforts in promoting healthy eating. NPAN II has proposed to discuss with the food industry to encourage food manufacturers to make available to consumers a greater variety of healthier food choices.

The number of consultations carried out will be noted and the food varieties introduced will be monitored to ensure they are in line with healthy eating principles.

These would include foods with higher nutrient densities (higher concentrations of protein, vitamins and minerals, dietary fibre) and lower in fat, carbohydrate and sugars.

Indeed, the food industry has been promoting the availability of such food varieties. This has been facilitated by the enforcing of a law in 2005 that allows food labels to make nutrition claims (eg high in, source of, or free of, low in, etc).

Of course, such healthier alternatives do help and can be part of our dietary pattern. Nevertheless, it should be borne in mind that

it is the total diet in a day that is important.

In addition to this approach, I would also like to emphasise that there are many other approaches that the food industry can take to promote healthy eating. Indeed, most large companies already have nutrition promotion activities such as disseminating leaflets or organising talks on specific nutrition topics.

Most of the time, these activities are linked to specific products they are marketing. I would urge companies to have general nutrition education activities that are in support of and promote the dietary guidelines* of the Ministry of Health.

I would also hope that such activities would include the smaller food manufacturers as their products reach out to a wide segment of the population.

Promote availability of healthy food choices

This activity is targeted at ready-to-eat foods, parallel to the one discussed above for processed foods. The Plan calls for consultation with vendors at the following food outlets to encourage them to make healthier

One specific activity of the Plan calls for promoting availability of healthy food choices in school canteens in line with the Malaysian Dietary Guidelines and the new School Canteen Guidelines.

Promoting active living

It is amply clear that besides an inappropriate dietary pattern, another major factor for the increase in diet-related chronic diseases is the sedentary lifestyle of the population. This strategy therefore includes promoting physical fitness activities for the general population at workplace.

No details of this component are given in NPAN II. It would require a variety of efforts to integrate physical activities into the work environment. The Ministry of Youth and Sports could be a key resource in some of the proposed activities.

Implementing the activities

NPAN II is ready; the system is in place. The challenge would be to implement the identified activities. To do this requires the collaboration of all stakeholders.

Even for this particular strategy of "pro-



Eating healthily will always be an integral component of any healthy lifestyle campaign.

food choices available to their patrons:

- In eating outlets
- By food caterers
- In school canteens

The number of consultations carried out are to be monitored. The menus available at these outlets will be monitored to determine if appropriate changes have been made in accordance with healthy eating principles.

Such activities are long overdue. I recall that in the 1997 Healthy Eating Campaign of the Ministry of Health, there were efforts to promote such activities among food vendors. I do hope under NPAN II, greater effort can be given towards these activities. Eating outlets should include fast food restaurants. There was a flurry of activity recently when the banning of advertisements by these food outlets was contemplated. I would urge that the momentum of consultations with these outlets be kept up with regard to providing more food choices to consumers.

Efforts to effect change among hawkers and street vendors would be more challenging. Nevertheless, efforts should be made and various approaches could be considered.

In relation to foods sold in school canteens, this too has been a longstanding issue. The lack of nutritional quality of foods sold in canteens has been highlighted from time to time. I have discussed this issue in some detail and hope that greater achievement can be made through NPAN II.

moting healthy eating and active living", several key players have been identified to implement the activities. It calls for a leader to move the activities; it calls for collaboration by other agencies. Successful implementation of such activities requires determination on the part of all stakeholders.

*Details of the Dietary Guidelines and other healthy eating tips are available on the Nutrition Society of Malaysia website: www.nutriweb.org.my

■ 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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