



**Nutri
Scene**

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What ate 2007

THE year comes to an end and we enter into a new one. As the curtain comes down on 2007, I have been reflecting on the nutrition activities for the year.

Let me share my musings of the main nutrition scenes in the past 12 months. Let us reflect upon these as we move into the new year.

Promoting nutritional well-being of Malaysians

Promoting nutritional well-being of the community was my focus for *NutriScene* write-ups throughout 2007.

I highlighted the National Plan of Action for Nutrition for Malaysia (NPANM) II (2006-2015) in several write-ups for this column.

An introduction was provided on January 28 and further details on July 8 and October 7. I had referred back to NPANM II in other write-ups. All this emphasis is simply because I believe that we have to be guided by this master plan that aspires to achieve and maintain optimal nutritional well-being of Malaysians.

NPANM II describes in detail strategies that various government agencies, academia, professional bodies and industry can collaborate to combat nutritional disorders.

In the course of the year, the Technical Working Groups (TWGs) formed under NPANM held meetings to implement the planned activities, for example, the TWGs on Dietary Guidelines and Nutrition Promotion.

Nutrition Month Malaysia (NMM) 2007 was highlighted in *NutriScene* to give it higher prominence across the country. NMM was launched as planned, focusing on tackling adolescent nutrition. A number of approaches were undertaken to promote NMM activities, including a seminar to highlight the NMM theme to school authorities, articles in newspapers and magazines, radio and TV shows, as well as talks and exhibitions at the state level.

In a write up on April 22, I had highlighted the importance of promoting healthy eating in schools.

The consumption of fast foods and the proposed banning of advertising of these foods were debated in the press earlier in the year. The pros and cons of disallowing the advertising of fast foods were discussed by various quarters.

I had shared with readers my thoughts on the topic in *NutriScene* of February 25. In a follow-up write-up on March 11, I had explained how understanding the nutritional value of foods can help consumers in making food choices.

Towards the end of the year, the Health Ministry announced the implementation of a set of guidelines for the labelling of the nutrient content of fast foods and the advertising of these foods to children.

Still on the issue of foods for children, the topic of school canteen foods was highlighted in the press. In my *NutriScene* write up of July 22, I provided some input, an analysis of the situation and suggestions for positive action. I had urged that we need to put the canteen issue to rest, once and for all.

Throughout the year, I had made efforts to discuss promoting healthy

A look back at nutrition developments of the last year.

eating and nutrition communications. I had highlighted these in three separate write-ups and also included them in other write-ups.

Right from the beginning, as we were entering into 2007, I had urged readers to adopt healthier eating habits as part of the new year resolutions.

I had emphasised the importance of being self-disciplined to adhere to this resolution. In the first write-up for 2007 (January 14), I had shared with you some tips on eating healthily even during festivities, as it would be particularly challenging to stick to healthy eating guidelines during such times.

Recognising the central role that a woman plays in the family, the society and the nation, and in conjunction with the national level celebration of Women's Day for 2007 on August 25, I had a write-up dedicated to this.

I had emphasised that good nutrition is imperative to enable a woman to contribute to her family and to the nation. I provided some points taken from the Woman@Heart programme of the Nutrition Society of Malaysia (NSM) that will help women meet their daily nutritional requirements and avoid deficiencies and excesses that may lead to nutrition-related problems.

I did a write-up on the carotene story (August 12), taking the cue from a story I read in the press about eating tomatoes and reducing risk from cancers.

I shared with readers the science behind carotenes and took the opportunity to encourage readers to eat sufficient amounts of fruits and vegetables, and to ensure that their children do so too. The coloured varieties of these plant foods are particularly high in carotenes in addition to many other vitamins and minerals and dietary fibre.

I have been deeply involved with nutrition labelling and claims regulations in the country for the past few years. I had provided some information for the better understanding of consumers through *NutriScene* of December 3 and December 17, 2006.

Such information on food labels can indeed become useful educational tools when appropriately used. I focused on this topic again in my last write-up for 2007 (*NutriScene*, December 23), discussing the challenges of communicating nutrition information through food labels.

I had shared with readers approaches taken by other countries in making more effective use of nutrition labelling, and hopefully, we can adopt the best approaches that suit our country.

Developments in nutrition science

NutriScene write-ups had also highlighted national and global developments in food and nutrition science through meetings that I had participated in the year.

The 22nd Annual Scientific Conference of the Nutrition Society of Malaysia was THE event of the year for nutrition scientists in the country.

In a write up of *NutriScene* on April 8, I summarised what happened at the conference. The conference provided the platform to discuss in some detail the main nutritional issues affecting adolescents in the country. The event was well attended by over 400 nutritionists, dietitians and allied professionals from all over the country.

I had highlighted functional foods in three separate write-ups. Developments in functional foods in Europe was discussed in a conference in Malta in May (*NutriScene*, June 3). The Asian perspectives of functional foods was deliberated in a conference in Kuala Lumpur in November (*NutriScene*, November 11).

In *NutriScene* of June 17, I had provided some examples of functional foods that we encounter in our daily lives, highlighting the functional properties or purported benefits of these foods. I had emphasised that the way to nutritional well-being is to eat a variety of foods to derive the nutrients that we need, as well as functional ingredients.

Trans fatty acids (TFAs) in foods was discussed in a seminar in Kuala Lumpur in September, attended by food and nutrition scientists and regulators.

Presentations covered three topics, i.e. effects on human health; occurrence in processed foods; and overview of regulatory approaches towards TFAs.

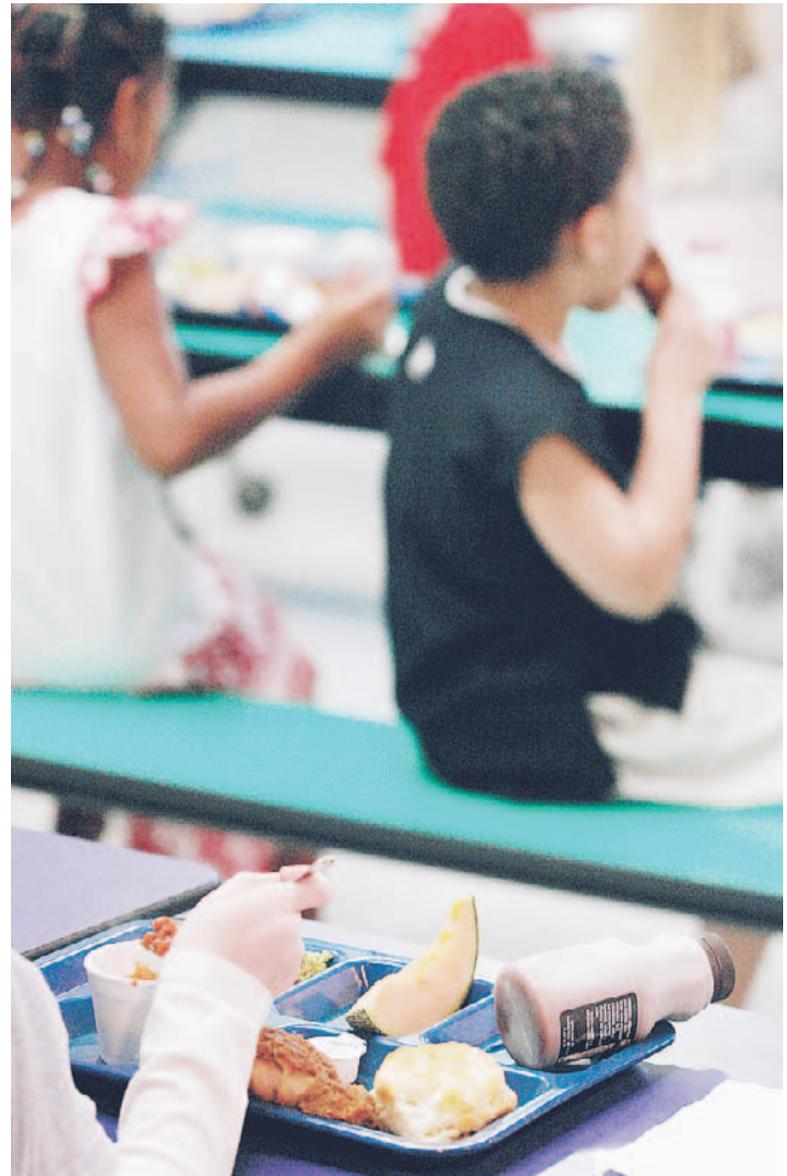
Following these updates, representatives from five organisations provided input on regulatory approaches that may be taken by Malaysia to reduce consumption of TFAs.

Thoughts for the year ahead

Nutrition promotion will certainly remain as the focus of my write-ups for the new year. I expect the nation will pay greater attention to prevention of chronic diseases, hence an even greater role for nutrition promotion.

I urge that the TWGs continue their work to implement the activities identified in NPANM II.

Nutrition Month Malaysia will certainly be featured again in the country in the new year. I had high hopes for NMM when it was first launched. Five years down the road,



We need to maintain our efforts to promote good nutrition knowledge to all. – AP

I must say I am disappointed with the achievements made and the intended impact on the community. I feel that we have not done enough.

Plans are being made for NMM 2008. I hope it will have greater reach to the public to raise the awareness of nutrition to a higher level.

In this regard, I cannot help but reflect on the challenges in communicating nutrition to the public. I have often asked myself, after 30 years of attempting to promote healthy nutrition to Malaysians, are people listening to my messages? Are we taking the right approaches in promoting healthy eating?

I really have my doubts as to how many people actually read, what more take actions. I mean: how many people who need to know about nutrition ACTUALLY read or take initiative to source for nutrition topics in papers and magazines?

Are the only ones reading the ones that are already sensitised to importance of good nutrition? In other words, are we preaching only to the converted? Through writings, are we missing out that segment of the community that really needs to gain nutrition knowledge?

I do not mean to say that there is no use in writing. We certainly need to continue to write, including explaining fine differences in nutrition information to those who know (or those who think they know) about nutrition. We need to clarify conflicting messages to these readers.

I have been advised by a friend that my writings in nutrition need to be "sexy" in order to be accepted by the paper for publication. They have to be "catchy" in order to attract the attention of readers.

Indeed, I agree I need to make my writing interesting enough. I must make it understandable. I realise I have to compete with food

and nutrition messages from other sources that may promise quick cures and solutions to nutrition problems.

However, as a mainstream nutritionist, I cannot sensationalise and promise people non-existent magic bullets to cure nutritional ills.

Nutritionists in the country need to play responsible roles in promoting healthy eating to the community. We have to practice evidence-based nutrition promotion. We have to take the time to convince the public that healthy eating through the official dietary guidelines are the most effective and safest ways to reducing risk to diseases.

We have to convince the public that there are no short cuts to losing weight or to reduce blood cholesterol and sugar levels. Nutritionists from various organisations must provide consistent messages so as not to confuse the public.

If we persevere, I am confident our messages will get through to some people, some time.

■ *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.