

Nutrition focus in 2008

Nutrition should be an important component of personal and family healthcare.



**Nutri
Scene**

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TIME flies. The year is coming to a close. There has been no shortage of excitement in nutrition activities in the country in the past 12 months. In this year-end write up, I would like to provide a round-up of the main nutrition activities through the year. Some of these topics were more relevant for health professionals, particularly nutritionists, while others are for members of the public.

Nutrition remains an important component of health services in this country. I am glad it is. Indeed, nutrition should remain as an important component of personal and family healthcare, in view of its close relationship to various diseases.

Nutrition Month Malaysia (NMM)

The objective of NMM is to promote greater awareness and the practice of healthy eating, in line with the Government's healthy lifestyle programme.

NMM 2008 adopted a broad approach, with the theme *Eat Right, Enjoy Life*. Several educational materials relevant to a contemporary lifestyle, fast-paced and hectic were produced. The emphasis to the public is that healthy eating is absolutely essential and indeed possible with hectic schedules and a challenging work-life balance.

The main publication of NMM 2008 was a 56-page guide and recipe book aimed at providing useful and practical tips on healthy eating and active living. Healthy eating is not just for Nutrition Month. Healthy eating is for all, at all times.

If you missed the supplement or the educational articles, or if you wish to obtain more information on NMM 2008 activities, visit the Nutrition Society of Malaysia website: www.nutriweb.org.my.

Nutrition scientific meetings

The most important nutrition scientific meeting in the country was the 23rd Scientific Conference of the Nutrition Society of Malaysia, held in Kuala Lumpur at the end of March.

The theme of this year's conference was *Holistic Approach to Nutritional Wellbeing*. There were five symposia sessions, with a total of 23 oral presentations. The first two symposia were carefully selected presentations aligned to the theme of the conference. Five invited international speakers presented industry food innovations to promote nutritional wellbeing. A regular feature was a symposium to enable members of NSM to share their views and experiences in a variety of issues on nutrition and health. Other regular features of this

series of scientific conference were the Young Investigator's Symposium as well as a scientific posters session which featured 114 posters.

Continuing with the society's efforts to provide incentives to young nutrition scientists, the usual NSM Prizes were given out. In addition, the NSM Publication Prize started this year, sponsored by a corporate member. Prizes were also given to undergraduates for oral and poster presentations.

I do hope the NSM conference will continue to grow from year to year, in the number of participants attending as well as in the number of presentations and posters. More importantly, I do hope the quality of the presentations and posters will continue to improve, in terms of the study approach, execution and content. The English language of these presentations itself can certainly be improved.

A significant regional scientific meeting was the International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI) Seminar and Workshop on Nutrition Labelling and Health Claims, held in mid-August 2008, in Bangkok. This is a series of workshops that ILSI has been organising since 2001, to enable officials of regulatory agencies in the region to be familiarised with international and regional regulatory developments and to share experiences.

The main topics discussed in this year's meeting included updates of the regulatory status of nutrition labelling and claims in the region; guidelines for scientific substantiation of claims; nutrient profiling; front-of-pack signposting; effective communication of nutrition information on food labels; understanding consumer attitude and behaviour.

I continued to be actively involved in two Codex Alimentarius activities, namely Codex Committee on Nutrition and Foods for Special Dietary Uses (CCNFSDU) and Codex Committee on Food Labelling (CCFL). Several draft standards were approved by CCNFSDU in November this year and include definition and content claim of dietary fibre; scientific substantiation of claims; revision of nutrient reference value (NRV) and nutritional risk analysis principles.

For CCFL, the main items that will continue to be given focus next year include nutrition labelling requirements in relation to implementation of the global strategy on diet, physical activity and health; definition of advertising; quantitative declaration of ingredients and labelling of genetically modified foods (GMFs).

Nutrition policy and programmes

Breastfeeding is the gold standard in infant feeding as it confers protection against illnesses and helps forge a strong bond between mother and child. The first approach to feeding infants should be mother's milk and this should be the sole source of nourishment for an infant up to six months of age. Despite this, the Ministry of Health (MOH) has highlighted that the proportion of mothers who continue breastfeeding up to six months is low.

As another effort to protect, support and promote breastfeeding practices in the country, MOH first



Awareness of nutrition facts and issues can help keep our families healthy and protect them from many lifestyle diseases.

formulated a Code of Ethics for Infant Formula Products in 1979. A revised version of the Code was launched on August 1, 2008 and was renamed Code of Ethics for the Marketing of Infant Foods and Related Products.

Basically, the code is a set of guidelines to control competitive promotion and advertising of commercial infant products. Ultimately, the code aims to uphold the supremacy of breast milk by protecting, promoting and supporting breastfeeding. It also aims to ensure proper use, when required, of infant formulas and related products and complementary foods.

I would urge all parties involved to do their part in promoting breastfeeding. Even manufacturers of infant formulas should also contribute to these efforts.

The excessive consumption of fast foods has been associated with the problem of obesity. Fast foods are said to be commonly high in fat, sugar and salt and low in complex carbohydrates.

Fast food restaurants have spread rapidly throughout the country, even into small towns. This rapid increase in popularity is probably due to the aggressive promotion of these foods by the industry, including through advertising. The authorities are particularly concerned with advertisements targeted towards children.

The Health Ministry is enforcing guidelines for the advertising of fast foods to children and nutrition labelling of these foods. MOH has defined "fast foods" as "foods that are prepared in large quantities, following standardised procedures and served rapidly in restaurants commonly known as fast food restaurants which usually advertise their services through the electronic and print media".

These guidelines are said to be self regulating, that is to say the fast food industry actively participates in, and is responsible for, its own compliance. It has been a year since these guidelines have been

enforced. It would be important to determine the extent of compliance of these guidelines by the fast food industry.

Activities to review the Malaysian Dietary Guidelines have been going on throughout the year. A group of nutritionists have been discussing in detail a total revamp of the 1999 dietary guidelines. After agreeing on the main messages in these guidelines, members of the group were assigned specific messages to develop in detail the contents required as well the recommendations.

The review is expected to be completed in mid 2009 and disseminated to the public. I shall certainly share with readers details of these guidelines in future *NutriScene* write-ups, especially since I have been involved in this review process.

A set of important health data became available in the year. I am referring to the data from the National Health and Morbidity Survey (MHMS) III, released by the Public Health Institute. The NHMS is a series of nation-wide surveys undertaken by the Ministry of Health every 10 years and each survey involve large number of properly sampled subjects throughout the country.

Findings of these reports, available in 21 volumes and covering a wide spectrum of health issues, should be made readily available to those who need them, including electronic versions. I have utilised the food and nutrition related data, e.g. nutritional status and child feeding for my *NutriScene* write-ups.

Food, nutrition, physical activity and the prevention of cancers

A significant global development was the release of the World Cancer Research Fund (WCRF) second expert report on *Food, Nutrition, Physical Activity and the Prevention of Cancer* in November 2007. There is now general consensus among scientists, health professionals, and

policy-makers that food, nutrition, physical activity, and body composition are important causes of cancers. It is further known that cancer is a preventable disease.

There are eight general recommendations and two special recommendations in this report for the prevention of cancer. Together, these 10 recommendations are designed to be integrated and to contribute to healthy dietary patterns, healthy ways of life, and general well-being.

Recognising that cancers are among the most important causes of death in this country, I feel that we can draw on the information provided in this report for our own cancer prevention programmes. I had devoted several *NutriScene* write-ups in the year highlighting four of the specific recommendations.

I will continue to highlight the remaining WCRF recommendations in future write-ups of *NutriScene*. I would like to continue to highlight to readers that the choices we make about what we eat, drink and how active we are each day will together give us important protection against cancer at all times of life, from childhood to old age.

■ *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.