

The Nutrition Society of Malaysia celebrates its silver jubilee this month with a commitment to further promote nutrition for life.

A society's journey



Nutri Scene

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COMMEMORATIVE activities were recently launched in conjunction with the 25th Scientific Conference of the Nutrition Society of Malaysia (NSM). A silver jubilee souvenir book and a video tracing the formation, growth, and the activities of the NSM over the years were launched.

Having been actively involved with NSM since its inception, I would like to share with readers a journey into its past 25 years. The activities of this professional body are focused on promoting nutrition science amongst its professional members as well as promoting healthy eating among the public.

I have extracted many sections of the NSM souvenir programme for this write-up. A complete version of the book can be downloaded from www.nutriweb.org.my. Many of the publications mentioned can be obtained from this website as well.

Birth of the society

A small core group of nutritionists met in the Institute for Medical Research in the mid-80s to discuss the formation of a professional body dedicated to nutrition promotion. The NSM was subsequently legally registered with the Registrar of Societies in 1985. The first annual conference and general meeting was organised on a modest scale in 1986 with Dr Chong Yoon Hin serving as its Founding president. This yearly scientific meeting was then carried out annually. The NSM went on to successfully host the Sixth Asian Congress of Nutrition in 1991.

Since its inception, NSM has been involved with several international nutrition organisations (especially the International Union of Nutritional Sciences, Federation of Asian Nutrition Societies, International Life Sciences Institute). These affiliations have placed us within a professional network and give us access to information and events that keep us updated on food science and nutrition matters around the globe.

On the local front, we actively collaborate with partner organisations (Malaysian Dietitians' Association, Malaysian Association for the Study of Obesity, Malaysian Pediatric Association, and the National Diabetes Institute) in activities for improving scientific knowledge as well as community services in the form of road-shows. Whether at home or abroad, NSM is now gaining due recognition and is increasingly being consulted by public and private organisations for advice on matters pertaining to nutrition.

Where nutrition scientists meet

Nutritionists look forward to the Annual Scientific Conference of NSM. The conference themes have been carefully selected to be relevant to prevailing trends and issues in Malaysia. At the conference, nutritionists get to learn, not only by listening to others, but also by sharing what they know.

For young nutritionists and students, the opportunity to present their papers and participate in the poster exhibition provides a memorable and constructive experience.

Through the conference (and occasionally, its scientific update meetings), NSM has benefited many by strengthening their knowledge base and sense of solidarity as participants in the rapidly growing field of nutrition.

The scope of nutrition research in Malaysia has changed dramatically over the years. Previously, the focus was on characterising the problems, like assessing the prevalence of underweight and stunting in children, or the extent of malnourished and anaemic preg-



Some of the participants at the 25th Scientific Conference of the Nutrition Society of Malaysia (NSM).

nant women in the country.

Today, the focus is on diet-related chronic diseases and the range of research subjects has expanded so widely that it ranges from nutrigenomics to functional foods and micro-nutrients.

Amid such a vibrant landscape, the NSM initiated the *Malaysian Journal of Nutrition* (MJN). Originally envisaged as a definitive publication on local nutrition research, MJN now also incorporates findings from outside Malaysia and is cited in Scopus and other databases.

Partnership in policy and action

NSM has always maintained a close working relationship with the Ministry of Health Malaysia (MOH). As a member of the National Coordinating Committee for Food and Nutrition, the society contributed actively towards the formulation of the National Nutrition Policy that, in turn, led to the development of various guidelines and activities.

Drawing upon its technical expertise and resources, NSM has also contributed to the formulation of guidelines, including the Malaysian Dietary Guidelines and Malaysian Recommended Nutrient Intakes.

To date, there have been two editions of the Malaysian Dietary Guidelines (MDG) – the first in 1999 and the second just launched in conjunction with NSM's 25th Anniversary Conference. The task of formulating the guidelines was entrusted to a technical working group that comprised representatives from local universities, government agencies, and professional bodies. In both editions, several NSM members were able to play a major contributory role.

Keenly aware of the nutritional status, eating habits, and lifestyle inclinations of Malaysians, NSM is tireless in sounding the clarion call of healthy eating for all. Conforming to recommendations of the official Malaysian Dietary Guidelines, NSM regularly mounts community nutrition education programmes and campaigns for the public, especially the highly successful series of community screening and advisory roadshows. They invariably promote the understanding of nutrition basics, coupled with practical tips for making healthy eating a way of life.

The focus in most of these campaigns has been on tackling diet-related chronic diseases, which have been increasing at an alarming rate since the 70s. The NSM is steadfast in its resolve to inspire positive change amongst the public, like eating a healthy diet, increasing daily physical activity, and maintaining

healthy body weight – simple measures with a profound impact on health and longevity.

Nutrition for women

Efforts to improve nutrition for women are clearly needed. Firstly, their nutritional needs change as they make their way through adolescence, adulthood, motherhood, and old age. Additionally, it is important to bear in mind the vulnerability of women to certain problems and threats, like iron deficiency anaemia, osteoporosis, overweight and obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, as well as cancers.

In caring for women, NSM finds every opportunity to encourage optimum nutrition by providing appropriate advice and reliable information. Towards this end, NSM entered into collaboration with the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development to develop an educational programme called Women@Heart.

The programme sought to develop content for training doctors, nurses, and other health-care personnel to become credible advocates and advisors in women's nutrition. They were also equipped with a booklet entitled *Women and Nutrition: A Practical Guidelines for Health Professionals* and a series of educational leaflets to aid their work.

For the children

Recognising that nutritional problems start young and that they can be averted if measures are taken early enough, NSM has been giving tremendous emphasis to child nutrition. Since the year 2000, the Society has been pursuing the aim of developing a perpetual resource consisting of authoritative information, advice, and tips for mothers, educators, and the children themselves.

To date, NSM has successfully produced guides for breastfeeding infants as well as feeding toddlers and pre-schoolers. The society has also collaborated with the Ministry of Health in "Projek Rintis Kantin Sekolah", a nutrition education initiative for primary school children in selected states. If proven successful, this pilot project will be fully implemented throughout the country. The NSM will be conducting a large scale nutrition intervention programme for primary school children in the coming months.

Nutrition Month Malaysia

NSM proposed the idea of organising Nutrition Month Malaysia (NMM) in 2002. Since then, the society has continued to play a leading role in this high-profile annual nutri-

tion promotion programme.

NMM involves the collaboration of Malaysian Dietitians' Association and the Malaysian Association for the Study of Obesity, and serves to bring nutrition into the public limelight at least once every year.

Focussing on a different theme since the beginning, NMM is now into its ninth year. From a small start-up, it has flourished over the last three years and become one of the largest nutrition promotion initiatives in the country. This is an achievement made possible only by the funding support of the Malaysia Health Promotion Board and the food industry.

Preparations for NMM 2010 are near completion and a number of educational thrusts will be delivered to the public, primarily focusing on primary school children, from end April. Updates on the implementation of NMM 2010, with the theme *Healthy Children, Healthier Nation – Start Young*, can be obtained from the NSM website.

The journey thus far

Since its establishment in 1985, NSM has contributed significantly in defining the understanding and practices of nutrition in this country. Although limited in its resources, NSM has persevered to make a difference.

From its modest beginnings, the society has now come to be highly regarded as the principal professional body in nutrition. By promoting academic enquiry and scientific exchange, NSM has spurred the growth of local nutrition research while facilitating the sharing of global knowledge.

In the realm of public education, NSM has continually reached out to young and old alike with valuable guidance to discover the benefits of good nutrition and a healthy lifestyle. The society has actively contributed in policy development and supported the implementation of action plans in consonance with the Government's vision to shape a healthier nation.

For 25 years, NSM has not only witnessed the transformation of our nation, it has also been instrumental in helping to shape a nutrition-conscious public. It has been challenging years, but I am glad that we persevered in our passion to promote good nutrition. We can and should be encouraged by the knowledge that, day by day, more people are becoming more concerned for their nutritional wellbeing.

We should keep up the momentum. However, our work risks being derailed by the growing slew of nutrition misinformation out there. It not only confounds the community, it also puts many in danger. We should continually endeavour to counter those misleading messages with evidence-based recommendations coming from credible nutritionists.

I personally believe that, as more nutritionists get involved in NSM, we will inevitably evolve into an even more dynamic and effective organisation. As we face the long road ahead, NSM shall abide by its unwavering commitment to promoting nutrition for life.

■ *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.*