

## PROCEEDINGS OF THE NUTRITION SOCIETY

*The Three Hundred and Ninety-eighth Meeting of the Nutrition Society was held at the Royal Society of Medicine, Wimpole Street, London, on 15 May 1984, when an address was given by the President, Professor J. C. Waterlow*

### **Our Society in the 1980s**

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I think that from time to time this Society needs to consider whether it is in touch with the needs of its members and adapting to changing conditions in the outside world. It is obviously the job of the president to give a lead in thinking about these things and I am therefore grateful to the Programmes Committee and the Council for allowing me to give a short talk at this annual general meeting.

As soon as this was agreed I realized that I do not actually know what this Society is and therefore asked Miss Deborah Leonard to extract, with the help of Mrs Schulkes, whatever information she could from the records held at the office. Her report has been circulated and it shows some interesting things. Compared with 40 years ago, we have far fewer medical members but more members with PhDs. We now have a much smaller proportion of people employed by government and a much higher proportion of women. However, the information being very incomplete, I propose circulating a simple questionnaire to all members asking who you are, what you do, by whom you are employed, etc. I hope you will not regard this as an impertinence and that there will be a 100% response because I believe this information to be quite important.

I want now to discuss very briefly three questions. Firstly, should we regard ourselves purely as a scientific Society or should we, as a Society, take account of practical problems arising in the outside world? I believe my predecessors have taken the view that the Nutrition Society should stick to the science of nutrition but I tend to think differently. To me nutrition, to a very important extent, is a practical subject. It bears the same relation to the basic disciplines of physiology and biochemistry as does, say, engineering to physics and chemistry. I think, therefore, that when controversial questions arise about the application of nutritional knowledge, we cannot just ignore them. The example that I have in mind is the report by the National Advisory Committee on Nutrition Education (1983) which, as you all know, has caused a considerable stir. The aim of that report was to provide guidelines for the education of the public in nutrition and it

came up against two very real, as opposed to political, problems. The first was the choice between making recommendations for the population as a whole, or of concentrating on those most at risk. The second problem was that people who are educating and exhorting people about their diet, quite naturally need to have some figures as a target. In the present state of knowledge, however, how can any figure be 'scientifically' justified? These are real dilemmas. I am not suggesting that this Society can solve them nor that it should take an official line, but I think such subjects need to be discussed. I can remember one occasion when the Society did have a meeting which departed from the usual format. This took the form of a discussion of the Neurberger Report and the general needs for nutrition research, and it was very successful (Nutrition Society, 1975).

The practical problem is one of flexibility. We have to plan our scientific meetings a long time ahead, but a discussion of practical questions may be more interesting and useful if it is topical and immediate. Perhaps we should plan for an 'open' day once a year, in addition to our normal programme, the topic and format for which could be decided at short notice. I also think that for some subjects there is much to be said for the old-fashioned, formal debate, with proposer, opposer and seconders, after which the floor is thrown open for further discussion. I do not think there will be any shortage of interesting topics.

Secondly, I should like to raise the matter of overseas contacts made by our Society. The planning of the 1985 International Congress programme, in which I have taken some part, has given me the impression that our contacts with the rest of the world are not perhaps as strong as they should be. Leaving aside the political problems that arise with any proposed international meeting, I believe that knowledge of what is going on in the rest of the world is particularly important in our subject. For example, I would suppose that, biochemically, rat-liver mitochondria behave in much the same way in India as in London; nutritionally, however, although the basic principles are universal, the problems with which we deal vary enormously with environment, a complete view consequently meaning a world-wide view. Moreover, the problems arising in different environments are not necessarily irrelevant to our own. Thus, the clinicians who are now taking a strong interest in the assessment of nutritional status are using concepts and methods developed years ago by people working on kwashiorkor in the tropics.

Regional organizations for nutrition in Latin America and Asia came into existence before our own Federation of European Nutrition Societies, yet it is only to the FENS meetings that we send an official representative. These are general meetings, but those in Asia and Latin America certainly have their main emphasis on human nutrition. I do not know the position in the fields of animal nutrition and food science. We do, of course, bring speakers from overseas to our own scientific meetings. It would be good if, in addition, we could send a representative to all the major regional meetings; not necessarily an officer of the Society, but someone who will make a scientific contribution and who will report back to us on matters of interest at the meeting. However, our capacity to do this will depend on our resources and we have to abide by the Treasurer's decision in these matters.

Thirdly are the questions I touched on in my Boyd Orr lecture nearly 4 years ago (Waterlow, 1981): that of nutrition as a profession and the related one of careers in nutrition. In the last few years I have been very worried that, after competent people from this country have trained to a good standard, there are no jobs in nutrition and no career structure. There are, of course, the traditional openings in universities and research institutes and, to some extent, in industry although, according to our current analysis, this sector in the UK only provides a small number of jobs which is not likely to increase. In addition, it seems to me self-evident that there is a need for nutritionists to provide a service in many fields of activity, and not only in the Third World. Unfortunately, this need is not recognized and translated into a demand.

As I see it, a profession consists of a group of people for whose services there is a demand, and for whom, therefore, in one way or another, society provides jobs and a career structure. The other side of the coin is acceptable qualifications and standards and a professional organization to uphold them. I wonder whether it might not strengthen the position of the younger people who want to work in nutrition if we had a professional organization within which they could operate. There is, of course, no disparity between nutrition as a profession and nutrition as a science—the profession is based on the science. The objectives of the professional and scientific bodies are different, however—the former is concerned with service, the latter with knowledge. This is a further topic for discussion which the Society might like to take up sometime.

The question then arises: supposing you are interested in pursuing some of the matters I have raised, how should the Society proceed? The Society is governed by a council which is to a certain extent self-perpetuating since, although nominations are open and members are elected by ballot, the Council nevertheless makes its own nominations which are aimed at maintaining a scientific and, to some extent, a geographical balance. Council meets once a year to consider the reports and recommendations of the various officers before presenting them to you here today. That business, for example consideration of subscription rates, examination of the state of the journal and the programme of meetings, etc., lasts for a whole day, leaving no time for discussion of matters of general policy. I think we need a second meeting each year precisely for that purpose, and the Council has agreed to hold such a meeting in September 1984. If it is successful and useful, it could become a regular event.

I believe it can be successful and useful only if we have feed-in and feed-back from the Society's members. Would it be possible, therefore, sometime between now and September, for groups of members to meet informally at, for example, the two schools in London and in Reading, Surrey, Southampton, Cambridge, Sutton Bonington, Aberdeen and no doubt other places where there are a number of members, and let us know whether you think the Society ought to take up topics of the kind I have touched on today, and no doubt others, together with any views you may wish to express. Naturally, such local meetings could not cover members countrywide, but if conveners and dates were made known, people from other

places could, hopefully, fit in wherever convenient. In this way the Council, when it meets in September, would have preliminary ideas concerning the wishes of the Society.

Hoping for an enthusiastic response, I leave the ball in your court.

National Advisory Committee on Nutrition Education (1983). *Discussion paper on Proposals for Nutritional Guidelines for Health Education in Britain*. London: Health Education Council.

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