

Introduction

In a world dominated by rapid changes, often dictated by the principles of globalisation, the ability to assess, monitor and compare dietary patterns of different populations is of paramount importance. The Data Food Networking initiative (DAFNE) refers to the collaborative effort of fifteen groups around Europe to develop a bank of regularly updated and comparable dietary data, based on Household Budget Surveys (HBS). The HBSs are periodically conducted by the National Statistical Offices in country-representative samples of households and the methodology followed is uniform enough to allow comparisons between countries, with only minimal adjustment.

The idea of exploiting HBS-collected food data goes back to the early 1980s and was developed in two workshops supported by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the European Union (EU), in 1987 and 1990 respectively. The proceedings of these workshops were summarized in a Supplement of the European Journal of Clinical Nutrition, published in 1992¹. In these early publications the objective was to present the pros and cons of using HBS data for nutritional purposes, and to further exploit the potential of these data for retrieving comparable information on food availability.

For the last seven years, the European Union has supported the DAFNE initiative*. The DAFNE databank has now been integrated in a software programme, DafneSoft. In addition to comparing the daily availability of several food groups and subgroups among various European populations, the user of DafneSoft can also follow the effect of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics on dietary choices. General information on the DAFNE initiative, copies of the reports, the list of publications and free access to DafneSoft are available at www.nut.uoa.gr.

This special issue summarises the work undertaken in the context of the DAFNE initiative during the last ten years. The paper by Lagiou *et al.*² provides an overview of the DAFNE work, summarizes the methodology for the derivation of dietary information from HBSs and presents the DAFNE classification scheme for food and socioeconomic data.

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For a dataset to be compatible with the DAFNE databank, the raw data should refer to both the quantity of foods available to household members during the recording period, and to the expenses incurred. In some European countries, the HBS food data mainly refers to expenses and no records are collected on food quantities. This constraint had to be tackled in the Irish data, and Friel *et al.*³ report on the conversion of food expenditures into the respective quantities and on the validation of the generated data.

While every effort has been made through discussions with DAFNE members to maximize comparability of data between countries, there was a need to further investigate the DAFNE databank through comparisons with individual data from food consumption surveys. This was an objective of the FAIR-3096 project entitled 'Compatibility of household budget and individual nutrition surveys (INS) and disparities in food habits'. Two papers in this supplement address compatibility by examining methodological issues referring to the individualisation of HBS data⁴ and to rendering HBS and INS-generated data comparable, at the level of the dietary information collected⁵. In a third paper results are presented and discussed⁶.

Using the DAFNE classification scheme for food and socioeconomic characteristics, data from the Portuguese HBSs collected in 1989/90 and 1994/95 were analysed⁷, in an attempt to identify the direction of changes in the Portuguese diet. The paper forms part of the current DAFNE work, which aims at combining data of consecutive surveys from nine DAFNE countries, in order to follow trends in food availability and to identify the socioeconomic characteristics that shape them. Upon completion of the project, the updated DAFNE databank will be integrated in the European Union Public Health Information Network (EUPHIN) of the European Commission.

Finally, the special issue includes three invited papers. Recently, the National Food Survey (NFS) and the Food Expenditure Survey of England, collecting information on household food consumption and expenditures, were merged into the new Expenditure and Food Survey (EFS). The paper by Rimmer⁸ presents the methods of data collection on foods eaten outside the household in the NFS and the new EFS, thus addressing an issue known to be affecting the nutritional interpretation of HBS data.

The compatibility of the dietary information from household budget and individual nutrition surveys is

further discussed in the paper by Becker⁹, in which the results of the combined household and individual food consumption survey, carried out in Sweden in 1989, are presented.

The paper by Spoznar *et al.*¹⁰ provides an overview of the Household Food Consumption and Anthropometric Survey, recently undertaken in Poland. The survey sample consists of households already participating in the national HBS. This design allows evaluation of how well food availability and food consumption data are correlated. Moreover, by providing information on how to tackle some limitations of HBS-derived data, it opens the way for a more efficient use of HBS nutritional findings.

The special issue concludes with a paper referring to disparities in food habits between various European populations¹¹. Disparities are further identified, according to sociodemographic characteristics of the households. Graphical presentation of these data in the form of maps and bar charts are also presented. This approach could be very useful for the development of food-based guidelines and for monitoring their implementation, since HBS data correlate with mortality and morbidity data¹².

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