

Out of the Box

This comes to you from the XIII Congress of the Latin American Nutrition Society (SLAN) in Acapulco. Well, I wish – but its five sizzling November days are done. *Agradecimientos e abraços fortes* to Adolfo Chávez, Abelardo Avila, Juan Rivera and many other colleagues.

Making history

First, the hot news. Ken Brown of the University of California at Davis previewed the new UN energy requirements of babies and young children, which should be in the public domain before you read this¹. Based on expenditure estimated by the doubly labelled water method, and notably the work of Nancy Butte and colleagues at the USDA Nutrition Research Center at Houston, these are a massive 11–18% less than previously estimated on the basis of intake². The take-home message is that the diets of babies and young children can and should be less energy-dense than has been thought. So a blow is struck for exclusive breastfeeding until 6 months, and against premature weaning onto fatty and sugary solid foods^{3,4}. Previous estimates will continue to mislead health professionals until the findings of the new UN report are built into paediatric practice world-wide, and must be one reason why obesity is now so common in children and thus adults.

During one of our regular sunrise swims in the Bahia de Puerto Marques under the Camino Real hotel, International Union of Nutritional Sciences (IUNS) president-elect Ricardo Uauy told me that the new UN report bases its energy expenditure recommendations on breastfed babies, and confirms that breastfed babies need 5–10% less energy than formula-fed babies. Because they have fewer bad dreams? I joked. Well, he said, breastfed babies have less REM [rapid eye movement] sleep and also less colic, both of which use energy⁵.

Walter Willett of the Harvard School of Public Health is on a roll. In a plenary presentation he de- and re-constructed the US-originated 'food guide pyramid', complaining of its failure to distinguish between whole-grain and processed starchy foods^{6,7}. That is not news. But during a later symposium at which we both spoke, I suggested that chemical terms be abandoned: 'carbohydrates' for example, beloved by food manufacturers for misuse on food labels⁴. Walt almost agreed, and ridiculed the manufacturers' mantra that there are no good and bad foods, only good and bad diets. He is close to saying that the issue is not foods and drinks as such, but what is done with them at all stages of food systems⁸. Given Walt's influence, this also would be hot stuff.

Who calls the tune?

Now for something different. Are nutrition congresses independent events, sponsored by food manufacturers in return for advertisements, stands, receptions, and scope to rub shoulders and press elbows? Or are they trade fairs organised by volunteer committees at which the presentations, including those by scientists employed or supported by industry, are side shows? At SLAN 2003 it was hard to tell. Perhaps, like the classic gestalt picture that 'flips' between being that of a rabbit and a duck and so may be named a 'duck-rabbit', they are both⁹. 'Congraffairs', perhaps?

Incoming to the congress at Mexico City airport, the long queue for customs included half a dozen pairs of very young men from the USA with crew cuts, cheap suits, rubber shoes and name tags, who smiled reflexively when they caught my eye. They were bringing The Word to the benighted natives from their fundamentalist church¹⁰. I remembered them, watching the long queues of young people at the Kellogg's and Nestlé stalls at Acapulco, waiting to be filled with food and words. SLAN 2003 was also a recruiting station for graduates who need money, work and reasons to believe.

The halls of the sponsors were centrally placed; with one exception, delegates had to walk through them to access the presentations. The principal sponsors were Nestlé, Unilever, Danone and Kellogg's, in 2002 respectively the global number 1, 2, 5 and 9 food manufacturers, with a combined annual turnover of \$US120 billion^{11,12}. Strategic decisions by such companies to support congresses, fund science, set up foundations, award prizes, make friends with, influence and hire people in the UN system, national governments and the scientific community, and generally to control public health nutrition agendas, are of course taken at a global level.

As a rule, the manufacturers most visible at nutrition congresses own some healthy products handed out at their stands, the test perhaps being 'will nutritionists be prepared to be photographed consuming this?' I downed lots of bottles of Nestlé water, ham sandwiches on brown bread donated by the Mexican firm Bimbo, delicious local varieties of tortilla chips with hot sauces, and yummy Danone yoghurts fortified with friendly flora.

Coke and rum doings

On Tuesday I recognised Maxime Buyckx, billed to speak in a symposium on 'Strategies to promote healthy diets and physical activity'. At the FAO/WHO International

Conference on Nutrition (ICN) in Rome in 1992, Maxime worked for FAO as an understrapper to then Head of Nutrition John Lupien. He now works for Coca-Cola. We had a chat. 'It's wonderful to see so many young people taking so much interest in nutrition' he said.

Coca-Cola was a minor sponsor of SLAN 2003, along with US Meat, Cadbury, Archer Daniels Midland (ADM) and local firms, thanked in the congress programme for their 'important and valued' contribution¹¹. The evident strategy of Coca-Cola and other firms that depend on sugars and sweeteners is: avoid discussing the products, keep a low profile, work behind the scenes, and promote sports and physical activity – much like Big Tobacco.

In his talk Maxime said that 'obesity is definitely a major factor in the environment', 'a very powerful issue for the child', and 'a complex issue' with 'behavioural, social, genetic and cultural aspects' involving 'the psychological use of food, lifestyle, television and video games, over-eating, genetic issues, and urban design'. He did not list 'high intake of sugars-sweetened soft drinks', identified by WHO as a probable cause of obesity¹³. (By the way, manufacturers may say that sugar equals sucrose. Phooey. Any -ose as listed on food labels is a sugar, as is any syrup, such as the high-fructose corn syrup used in Coca-Cola.)

Maxime averred that 'obesity is a platform for multiple agendas' including those of the 'media and activists'. He outlined Coca-Cola's 'active living initiative' including a 5 km fun run that had set off at 7 am that morning. He said that 'consumption of all our beverages can fit into a healthy diet and active lifestyle'. He added that Coca-Cola has a 50-year-old policy of not promoting its products to children under the age of 12. The recent collaboration between UNICEF, British Airways (BA) and Coca-Cola, whereby BA travellers have been invited to drink Coca-Cola and Schweppes products to raise 1p a can for relief of childhood malnutrition in Africa, will count not as marketing to but on behalf of young children¹⁴.

My questions to Maxime were (1) why no mention of 'heavy marketing of energy-dense foods', also identified by WHO as a probable cause of obesity¹³, bearing in mind that the current global advertising and marketing spend of Coca-Cola is \$US1.4 billion – I repeat, billion – a year¹²; and (2) how much money and what other support had Coca-Cola given to the congress? He replied that as a member of Coca-Cola's science division he wished he had that kind of budget, and that he had no information on funding or support.

The day after the congress ended, I took a taxi downtown, and passed a fairground whose entrance was plastered with advertisements for Coca-Cola. Was this a freelance initiative? Or in Acapulco are only teenagers and adults admitted to the fun of the fair?

The hot ticket for SLAN 2003 was the presentation of the €120,000 Danone International Prize for Nutrition, held on the Tuesday evening at the historic fort of San Diego^{15,16}. The evening was mellow, as were we all after an hour or

so of tequila sunrises, cuba libres and margheritas. The speech I remember best was made by Franck Riboud, the global boss of bosses of Groupe Danone, who repeated with increasing emphasis: 'This is *not* the time to speak of... [new Danone product #1]. This is *NOT* the time to speak of... [new Danone product #2]' and so on, and on, until he said this *was* the time to speak of prize-winner Ricardo Bressani, who, working at the WHO/PAHO Nutrition Institute of Central America and Panama (INCAP) in Guatemala, has explored ways to improve the nutritional value of native foods¹⁷.

Afterwards we were all ushered up onto the ramparts and offered delectable octopus served on the shell, scrumptious meat, chicken and fish, the most delicious *mole*, and more margheritas, cuba libres and tequila sunrises. On gala occasions like this, branded products are off the menu. It was a splendid occasion, for which renewed thanks. I went to bed wondering about the faintly manic presentation of M Riboud.

Not drinking but waving

I attended a joint PAHO/ILSI symposium the next morning on the promotion of healthy lifestyles to prevent obesity, of which Cheryl Long of ILSI was billed as co-ordinator.

The International Life Sciences Institute, with its mission as 'a global partnership for a safer, healthier world'[®], has a name redolent of authority. I well remember the atmosphere when Derek Yach, then WHO Executive Director responsible for prevention of chronic diseases, stood up during a WHO Executive Board plenary session in January 2001 and said that ILSI's observer status with WHO needed review because of apparent links with Philip Morris. As a result a WHO internal memorandum dated 7 November 2001 was circulated, recording a meeting with ILSI executives in which WHO complained of the 'failure to fully disclose ILSI's funding sources' and a 'perception that many of the developing country partners and recipients of funds are unaware of ILSI's funding base'. ILSI agreed to disclose its sources of funding, and at the 2003 WHO Executive Board meeting its observer status with WHO was renewed on a conditional basis¹⁸.

The ILSI question is not really about possible links between ILSI and Big Tobacco, except inasmuch as Philip Morris owns Kraft, the global number 3 food manufacturer¹², under the umbrella of Altria[®]. ILSI is the most remarkable example of a global organisation originally set up to defend the interests of a section of industry, in this case Coca-Cola and other US-based giant food manufacturers, now positioned as a 'non-profit, worldwide scientific research foundation seeking to improve the well-being of the general public through the pursuit of sound and balanced science'¹⁹.

The founding and long-standing president of ILSI, the (mellifluous) Alex Malaspina, combined this job with his Coca-Cola vice-presidency. In Alex's day I had the

impression that ILSI's number one mission was to limit any discussion about sugars to dental caries, and to eliminate reference to sugars in documents such as the ICN Declaration and Plan of Action. This successful work has been aided for decades by the vigorous funding and fêting of relevant scientists by the sugars-dependent industry²⁰ and now, during this period of gradual privatisation of the UN system, by ILSI's support of UN initiatives, often worthy in themselves, that have distracted attention from the pathogenic effects of food systems and thus diets high in sugars, and indeed in saturated fats and salt.

I came in late to the PAHO/ILSI symposium, so I don't know whether it was Cheryl Long or Debra Kibbie of ILSI who bade us all rise and wave our arms while reciting the names of fruits and vegetables. Then she whizzed through a roster of public-private physical activity initiatives such as GEMS, Pathways, PAN, Hearts'n'Parks and America on the Move.

I asked Debra or Cheryl if she could tell us how many members of relevant governing bodies of ILSI are employees of the soft drinks industry. I also asked for ILSI's view of the slide shown after her presentation by Enrique Jacoby of PAHO, displaying the judgement of WHO that probable causes of obesity are high intakes of sugars-sweetened soft drinks and also heavy marketing of energy-dense foods. She told us that ILSI was founded in the context of the wars between the sugars and chemical sweetener industries (she did not quite put it like this), and that she knew in advance that Enrique would show the WHO slide. Heavens! Did this mean that ILSI had granted permission to PAHO?

Afterwards I browsed the ILSI website¹⁹. The button for 'members' is locked. The site does list ILSI members of its 17 regional and national branches – hundreds of them, almost all from the food manufacturing, drug and agrochemical industries, including Coca-Cola (nine times), NutraSweet (six times), Pepsi-Cola (seven times), Nestlé (10 times) and Kellogg's (10 times). The site also states that scientists from industry sit on various ILSI boards. I did not access any lists with names.

Fortified chow

I made a presentation that afternoon on icons designed to guide food choice, and – to emphasise the power of images – included slides of a Kellogg's product, branded as Frosties[®] in the UK, Sucrilos[®] in Brazil and Zucaritas[®] in Mexico, together with Tiger Tony[®]. With roughly 40% sugar by weight and energy, this is confectionery, but because 10 or more vitamins and minerals are added, it is marketed both as a fun food and as a health food to mothers and their children. 'Fulthood', perhaps?

On the first day of the congress I had stopped by the Kellogg's stall, awed by another product, Froot Loops[®] with Toucan Sam[®] – curiously, also the symbol of the main centre-right political party in Brazil. This contains

around 45% sugar, and is marketed as confectionery, with the loops in and maybe on the pack coloured with sunset yellow, brilliant-blue FCF and other chemicals. It also is fortified with a battery of vitamins and minerals, and its packs and posters in Mexico state that the product is endorsed by the *Asociacion Mexicana de Pediatria*. Kellogg's also markets ranges of sweetened, flavoured, coloured, fortified cereal bars and powdered milk, in which sugars are the first or second ingredient, to mothers and their children. Similar products are manufactured by Nestlé, in Mexico in association with General Mills: the Nestlé/GM product Trix[®], which I found in the breakfast dispenser at the Camino Real, is much the same as Frosties/Sucrilos/Zucaritas.

Instafood products like these have been marketed for decades to dog and cat owners, and now to mothers and their children, with the added attraction that kids pester their mothers for fun foods^{21,22}. Owners and parents are drawn to chow that is branded, uniform and convenient, containing ingredients that keep pets and kids both contented and avid, with the added promise of good health.

In Brazil and other Southern countries, government programmes give impoverished mothers some money to buy foods of their choice for their children. Denise Coitinho, who in the previous administration was responsible for the Brazilian *Bolsa Alimentação* programme, now known as *Bolsa Família*²³, greeted me at the Kellogg's stand. I asked her if governments might prompt community health professionals to encourage mothers living in regions where nutritional deficiencies are endemic, to buy fortified products like Froot Loops. She said 'I can well imagine situations where Ministries of Health would recommend such products, especially if endorsed by health professional organisations'.

I inserted some snaps of the Froot Loops packs into my presentation on Wednesday. One intervention was from a delegate I had seen at previous SLAN conferences, who seemed to think this was not appropriate, and who spoke of the need to collaborate with industry. 'Who is he?' I asked afterwards. 'Oh, Luis from Kellogg's', I was told.

Look around you

On Thursday the closing ceremony began with a film celebrating the congress, featuring what seemed to be a round-table of heavy-hitting nutrition scientists with big cards positioned in front of them, with their names and those of congress sponsors: thus, Hector Bourges/Danone, Ricardo Uauy/Kelloggs, Carlos Monteiro/PowerAid and my favourite, Juan Rivera/Bimbo. I later learned that the film was made at a breakfast meeting at the Acapulco Hyatt set up to enable senior scientists to guide young Mexican nutritionists, as requested by the congress organisers. Was the film just a frolic, or was it indeed a set-up? Carlos Monteiro of the University of São Paulo was not aware that a film was being made, and was displeased.

'I am known in Brazil as someone who does not do business with commercial companies' he told me afterwards. Would somebody seeing the film suppose he had some sort of relationship with PowerAid? Well, what was in the minds of the people who constructed special name cards on which were printed the names of influential nutrition scientists together with the names of congress sponsors, and who then directed a section of a film in which the faces of the scientists and the name cards were the feature, which was then shown at the closing ceremony of the congress – and maybe on other occasions afterwards? Let us not be naïve. The other scientists featured might take a more relaxed view. Personally I prefer to be consulted about such things and my permission asked.

The morning after, I had breakfast with José Dutra de Oliveira, the distinguished Brazilian nutritionist of the University of Ribeirão Preto in São Paulo state. Dutra is a former president of IUNS, and president of the jury for the 2003 Danone International Prize, this work ending at SLAN 2003¹⁶. He is also President of the Danone Institute in Brazil – or so it is written^{15, 16}. During our wide-ranging conversation, he cast light on the speech of Franck Riboud. The global network of Danone Institutes is being restructured, so as to be more effective in corporate public relations. It seems that the board of Danone Brazil has been reorganised so that a majority of its members are from the company. As of the SLAN congress, Dutra stepped down as president of the Brazilian Institute. 'It will not be difficult for Danone to find somebody to take my place' he told me.

I approached Luis on Thursday in the halls of the sponsors, and we had a chat. He is Luis Mejia; he has left Kellogg's and is now Director of Regulatory and Scientific Affairs for ADM, the world's largest processor of soybeans, corn and other animal and human feeds, with a big share of the global market in other commodities, headquartered in Decatur, Illinois¹². If I mention that Dwayne Andreas resigned as ADM chairman after a 6-year federal case investigating price-fixing of the amino acid lysine, a business worth around \$US1 billion a year, as a result of which three senior ADM executives were sent to the slammer in 1999, Maxime will certainly position me as an activist^{24,25}. Luis was annoyed. 'There is no point in being antagonistic' he said. 'You need to collaborate. Industry is going to do what it does, no matter what you say ... Look around you!' He gestured towards the stands of the sponsors. 'You wouldn't be here without the support of industry. That's reality'.

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