

Out of the Box

Man is not a rat

With reference to my last column¹, John Garrow tells me that ‘man is not a rat’ is not his aphorism (Garrow J, personal communication). He attended a meeting in Paris in 1973 with the theme ‘Energy balance and obesity in man’. The distinguished French chairman was blind, and successive speakers, whose papers concerned energy balance in laboratory rats, overran their scheduled times.

Dr Otto Edholm of the MRC unit at Hampstead was on last. When he came to speak, the time for the whole meeting had passed. In John’s words: ‘Otto had good data on men (mostly military trainees). He noted that it was time for him to end his presentation, said it could be summarised thus: “Man is not a rat”, and with these words stepped down from the stage to applause from me, and bewildered silence from the other members of the audience, who were mostly “pure” scientists’.

Lighting a candle

Two qualities in common between John Garrow and David Horrobin are a sense of style and giving due credit.

In 1990, the McCarrison Society published a tribute to the life’s work of Hugh Sinclair, which I edited². David – then at a height of his success with the products of evening primrose oil branded as Efamol – put up the money and told of how, when he was postgraduate at Magdalen College, Oxford, Hugh inspired him to move to nutritional medicine, and to essential fatty acids and the health of the nervous and other systems.

David reminded me that he and I both featured in a Balliol freshmen’s photograph taken many years before. My rooms then overlooked the Martyrs’ Memorial, where Hugh Latimer, a churchman who opposed the enclosure of peasant land, was burned for his sedition, or what might now be called food terrorism, declaring on the stake that ‘we shall this day light such a candle by God’s grace... as I trust will never be put out’.

Hugh was moved when I gave him a copy of our *festschrift*, two weeks before he died. For the World Cancer Research Fund in the 1990s, David reviewed applications for research grants promptly, incisively and generously. Typically of him, he attacked the peer review system³, yet helped those who work within current paradigms.

David created space for the expression of ideas in *Medical Hypotheses*, a journal he founded, and encouraged mainstream editors to publish original thinking. Another testament to David is his last *Lancet* article, written when he knew he was dying (Kelliher A, personal communication), about ethical problems of long-term trials of treatments for diseases likely to kill quickly⁴.

Keepers of established order persecute original thinkers⁵. Scientists who are demystifiers and/or entrepreneurs and who work both inside and outside the system are the subjects of trebled suspicion and jealousy⁶. Practitioners of nutritional medicine who go beyond naturopathy and commend natural or synthetic concentrates to prevent or treat disease are liable to a full cross, garlic and incantation seeing-to from those in authority and their followers, whose own medicine cabinets may include ‘unproven’ remedies.

This may be a context for the ‘obituary’ of David published by the *British Medical Journal*⁷, which provoked a torrent of outrage amounting eight weeks later to 125 pages of letters on the excellent BMJ website⁸. These almost all condemn what is seen as a venomous attack, which, at the count of David’s son-in-law⁸, contains 20 errors and nine insinuations, some highly damaging to David himself, who cannot respond, and to the representatives of his business interests, who can. Some letters also remark on the choice of author for the obituary, a notorious campaigner against practitioners of nutritional medicine⁹.

The response of the Press Complaints Commission to the BMJ ‘obituary’ will be known before this Out of the Box is published. As a veteran of High Court cases involving product defamation, as defendant, plaintiff and witness^{10,11}, I think the view of m’learned friends would be instructive. Meanwhile I light a candle for David.

A riff on garlic

Now for something not completely different. Bruce Chatwin was famous for ‘riffs’ – confabulations that might become books¹². Here are some public health nutritional aspects of my riff on garlic, a potential monograph like those on cod¹³, sugar and tea¹⁴, or a treatise like Elizabeth David’s on bread¹⁵ or Radcliffe Salaman’s on the potato¹⁶.

Is garlic a food, or a herb? And what is a herb? This gave the World Cancer Research Fund’s expert panel responsible for its 1997 report¹⁷ some bioactive constituents for thought, and garlic was classified as a herb, between cumin and ginger.

Given that herbs are edible plants with medicinal qualities, and if this broadly means preventing disease or promoting health, then surely – from what we now know about vegetables and fruits in general^{17,18} – they are herbs. Or is the distinction culinary or, to be precise, aromatic? If so, *manga-rosa* and *manga-jasmin*, varieties of mango grown in the north-eastern states of Brazil which when cut ripe have an intense perfume of rose and jasmine, are herbs.

Is it simply that herbs are plants used as condiments? But then, what about France? And here in Brazil? In my

local branch of Bahamas, the *mineiro* supermarket chain, whole fresh garlic is piled up in heaps occupying the same space as onions, peppers, tomatoes, potatoes and yams. Shoppers riffle through the piles and fill plastic bags with firm and juicy bulbs. And outside Comper, my local supermarket in Brasília, boys sell for roughly US\$2, two dozen bulbs of garlic woven into a rope of straw, like the strings of that other allium vegetable, onions, cycled into Britain by Bretons in days of yore.

Brazilians get through a lot of garlic. Here is my variation of *arroz brasileiro*¹⁹. Heat olive oil in cast iron pan to fizz point. Take two bulbs of garlic. Top and tail like onions. Cut through the middle with serrated knife, carefully so your thumb does not separate from your hand. Sling halved cloves in pan. Sizzle until golden. Add cup of whole-grain rice, stir, then two-and-a-half cups of water, minimal salt, nuts, currants and seeds. Cover and simmer for 20 minutes. Yum.

Or is it that herbs are plants with healing powers? This is what wise women have believed throughout history. In the Ayurvedic tradition, no distinction is made between food and herbs. Staying at a Sri Lankan rest-house in 1985, I found that when there was infection going around, the balance of fruits, vegetables, leaves and spices eaten by all the family was altered, according to a well-understood formula.

And garlic? Research is mostly from countries where garlic is used as an occasional condiment, with individual cloves peeled, pressed through crushers and dabbled on steak. Does garlic feature in studies based on food-frequency questionnaires? Not a lot. The WCRF report¹⁷ states that 'garlic extracts have been found to kill *H. pylori in vitro* in concentrations achievable *in vivo*', but such evidence did not impress the panel.

However, the evidence on allium vegetables in general was rated as 'convincing' against stomach cancer, and Table 6.3.3 in the report displayed a large majority of epidemiological studies showing that allium vegetables protect against cancer in general. So, if garlic is consumed not as a condiment but like onions, as a vegetable, then... well, I sense a public health nutrition hypothesis coming on! Here ends the beginning of my riff on the nutritional aspects of garlic.

Pingo pongo

In May I went to WHO Geneva, for consultations on its global strategy on diet, physical activity and health, as enjoined on WHO by the World Health Assembly²⁰. I was invited as representative of one of a miscellany of PINGOs (public interest non-government organisations), DONGOs (disease-oriented NGOs) and GONGOs (government-organised NGOs), who altogether can be relied on not even to agree what is an NGO. In prior discussion WHO staff said that in principle PONGOs, BONGOs and BINGOs (profit- and business-orientated

and business-interest NGOs) were not excluded, but in the event none turned up. Or did they? That depends on the definition of P-O and B-O, but... no, don't ask, not now.

The meetings, with Dr Brundtland (the outgoing Director-General) and Dr Derek Yach (then the Executive Director of the WHO division of Non-Communicable Diseases and Mental Health), began with the usual 'alleluia' to WHO Technical Report 916¹⁸ and 'amen' to the draft global strategy²¹ as authorised by the World Health Assembly²⁰.

In May Dr Brundtland had already consulted with 'key players in the food industry': heavy hitters from Cadbury Schweppes, Coca-Cola, Compass, Kellogg's, McDonalds, Mizuno, Nestlé, Pentland, PepsiCo, Royal Ahold, Unilever, Winterthur and Yum! Brands. At this meeting²² she said that food is not tobacco, and that WHO and the private sector should share experiences and learn from one another. One 'action point' agreed was more research on food labelling. This made me imagine convocations between early popes and Goth and Hun warlords, ending with agreement that the benefit of notices on top of pyramids of skulls saying 'best Ligurian' or 'new improved axesmithing' or 'it could be yoo-hoo' should be the subject of further convocations.

The NGO consultation reminded me of the councils at Nicaea, Ephesus and such-like places, set up to agree when is a testament a Testament, to which assorted visionaries, doomsayers, zealots, cave-dwellers and stylites were invited, or showed up anyway to the disgust and disdain of the mitred mighty, who were going to decide what the Nazarene said and didn't say and meant and didn't mean anyway, no matter what the rantings and ravings of the assembled argumentative, stinking, flea-bitten riff-raff in search of martyrdom and sainthood.

I denounced a process designed to promote a global strategy with special attention to the South^{20,21}, in which WHO chose without consultation to appoint as chairs of the NGO working groups, two Englishmen. They were aided by another quiet Englishman from the ambiguous Stakeholder Forum, hired by WHO in a curious transaction to explain to WHO and to the NGOs what the NGOs were saying.

I also suggested that passages in the consultation document²³ which we were assembled to gloss, such as 'a strategic life-course approach will enable populations to be spontaneously active as well as to obtain appealing and affordable foods of an appropriate nutritional composition', could – as with early Coke ads – be set to the tune of 'I want to teach the world to sing' but would not get bums on (or off) seats in the shantytowns of Mumbai. I further complained that Dr Brundtland's advisors continued to confuse the food industry as a whole, with transnational food manufacturing and catering companies. What about the workers and the peasants? Do they hold a stake?

Four NGO representatives, David Sanders from the University of the West Cape, Lida Lhotska of the World Alliance of Breastfeeding Action, Patti Rundall of the International Baby Food Action Network and me (who – as put about one of my old English chums – represented nothing more than my own rancid opinions), had come with an agreed text from The Alliance for People's Action on Nutrition²⁴. The Alliance, originally masterminded by Flavio Valente of the Alliance for Nutrition and Human Rights, was launched at the UN SCN meeting in Chennai²⁵, and represents a large number of international NGOs based in all continents.

The Alliance text emphasises the underlying and basic social, economic and political causes of disease. It endorses the Bellagio and Indaba Declarations^{26,27}. One of its recommendations is that 'methods of food production, processing and preparation known to be beneficial to human health, and which have minimal environmental impact and resource implications, are increasingly used, and methods agreed to be harmful to human health, are phased out'. This was a bit like saying that skull pyramids are perhaps past their mass decapitation-by date, and how about giving peace a chance? Not a foundation for the Pax Americana whoops! Romana. One more mutter from you abominable terrorists apostates about stakeholding, and it's daisy-cutters impalement for you!

Dr Brundtland said she had no problems with the Alliance statement. The next day, the NGO working groups agreed to adopt the Alliance recommendations, together with others presented by the Center for Science in the Public Interest²⁸. This was the equivalent of a commendation from the throne, and then acclamation from all the hairy ones, that Gnostic texts proclaiming Jesus as the child magician and adult vegan, some of which turned up 16 centuries later in stone jars in Dead Sea caves^{29,30}, become incorporated into the first authorised New Testament. Slim chance! Various WHO staff enjoined us to take care, reminded us that Dr Brundtland was soon 'out of here', and wanted to know who wrote the Alliance document. Golly! We were marked for shredding!

As with the David Horrobin 'obituary', the deeper agendas of WHO in this time of its regime change are a subject for a report, not just this *amuse-bouche*. Back from WHO I went to the Rua Lavradio, the street of bygones in Rio. With a double fellow feeling, I bought a wooden figure of St Sebastian, the patron saint of the city of São Sebastião do Rio de Janeiro, carved by Expedito, the master craftsman from Piauí named after the patron saint of impossible causes.

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