

EDITORIAL

The development of nutritional concepts

As many members of the Nutrition Society will be aware, there has been a considerable change in the Society over the past few years which has led to the establishment of an accreditation scheme and the formation of a Register of Accredited Nutritionists. This development, which arose originally from a need to establish the professional credentials of a nutritionist, marked the transition of the Society from a learned society, concerned only with the advancement of the nutritional sciences, into a society that was aware of its additional responsibilities for developing the profession of nutrition and the interpretation of nutritional concepts to the Government and other bodies. In developing the criteria for accreditation it was inevitable that one had to consider what constituted a nutritionist and what type of professional training one would expect a nutritionist to have.

This led to a request from the Society to the Institute of Biology to review and prepare a report on the training of nutritionists which is now being considered within the Society. One concept that is emerging during this debate is the existence of a core of science that forms the essence of the nutritional sciences.

On several occasions during the past few weeks I have found myself drawing what Tony Buzan calls 'mind maps' in order to develop my own thoughts of what this core might include. Our Society is not alone in examining its views of what are the proper concerns of the nutritional sciences and, indeed, the members of the American Institute of Nutrition have even been asked whether the term 'nutrition' actually reflects what we are currently doing, especially in nutritional research. Some of this concerns the 'image' of the nutritional sciences, a topic which I intend to make the subject of an Editorial in the future.

The Nutrition Notes of the American Institute for June 1991 has a very interesting contribution in which the Faculty of the Division of Nutritional Sciences at Cornell attempts to conceptualize what Nutritional Science embraces. They produce a diagram which shows very clearly what many nutritionists have grown up believing – that nutrition is a multi-disciplinary activity whose core or, more strictly, cores lie in many of what I consider the basic sciences; this includes many of their newer offspring having their origins in the techniques of molecular biology and immunology, but also involves the behavioural sciences and those disciplines concerned with the study of the organization of society. I am reminded of Dr Egon Kodicek's comment that 'the nutritional sciences are distinguished by the questions that are being addressed rather than the disciplines or techniques involved'.

The first question that we ask of a referee about a paper that is being considered for publication is: 'Is the work of value in developing nutritional concepts?' My philosophy on this is based on the premise that in the nutritional sciences we are concerned with the study of the responses of the organism to diet and its components, and that any research that enables us (or is a stage towards us being able) to understand, so that we can predict the responses, contributes to developing nutritional concepts. In the *British Journal of Nutrition* we are primarily concerned with the responses of animals rather than plants or microorganisms, although the importance of the interactions between the intestinal flora and the nutrition of the host in ruminants and non-ruminants, including man, means that this boundary, in common with many boundaries in the biological sciences, is not absolute.

The relationships between the responses of the organism and diet are of great complexity, and establishing the form that these relationships take, sufficiently well to be able to predict them, is a formidable intellectual challenge that will require the application of the complete armoury of concepts and techniques that modern science can provide. In these studies the powerful insights that come from comparative nutritional studies have been, and will continue to be, important. One correspondent recently chided me because I had said that I hoped to have more papers on human nutrition submitted for publication in the *British Journal of Nutrition*, which was interpreted by my correspondent as a bias against large-animal nutritional studies. I was stung by this remark; clearly he was unaware of the research environment in which I was fortunate to spend my early career! I hastened to assure him that I did not mean fewer papers on the nutrition of other species because, while these have specific relevance for the species studied, they also contribute greatly to the overall development of the concepts of nutrition.

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