

THE NUTRITION SOCIETY

THE ROLE OF THE NUTRITION SOCIETY: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

Report on a colloquium of the Nutrition Society held at the Royal Society of Medicine on Friday, 19 May, 1978

There were two introductory talks. Dr A. M. Copping traced the history of the Society from its formation in 1941. The original aim was to arrange meetings at which leading nutritional scientists could discuss problems of food and nutrient supply. As Government Ministers attended these discussions, the Society was, in effect, informing the Government which at the time was faced with the problem of feeding the nation properly under war-time conditions. At its inception, therefore, the Nutrition Society was influencing Government policy, a situation that no longer pertains.

Dr D. J. Naismith, commenting on the present, defined the role of the Society in the 1970s as the advanced scientific study of nutrition and its application to the maintenance of human and animal health. He maintained that the business of the Society is research, carrying out research and debating areas of controversy. Thus, the Society cannot have a corporate view and should not aim, as a body, to advise Government, the public or anyone else. This task he stated, should be left to other organizations such as the British Nutrition Foundation and to individuals. His plea was that the Society should stick to what it does best – research and the discussion of research problems, for which it has an enviable reputation.

After the two introductory papers, there was general comment from the floor. Most of the general discussion was on the subject of whether or not the Nutrition Society should change its present role and accept responsibility for informing the public and Government about nutritional matters by establishing working parties, publishing reports and issuing press statements. To facilitate this, the appointment of a press officer was suggested. There was a clear division of opinion on this issue. Supporters of the view claimed the Society is failing to accept its social responsibility. If the Nutrition Society, which includes in its membership the leading nutritionists in the country, cannot come to a decision on matters relating to health and food supply, how could one expect the less well informed housewife and policy makers to do so. The alternative view was taken that nutritionists were consulted as individuals by Government and policy decisions were influenced by nutritionists if not by the Society. It was also pointed out that the development of a stronger public image could entail a big increase in expenditure.

A second theme was an expression of concern about the corporate feeling within the Society. There is a continual debate about how best to bring together those studying the ruminant and those working on non-ruminants. The division is sometimes between animal orientated and human orientated workers. The consensus view was that the combination of human and animal, including livestock, nutrition in one learned society is basically sound especially now that there is a growing awareness of the need to relate food supply and the nutritional needs of the consumer. Indeed, it was suggested that in planning symposia it would be desirable to embrace fully yet more disciplines, such as sociology, economics and administration.

A number of members felt that great efforts should be made by the Society to influence and to assist on the international scene. Many nutritionists in developing countries had limited opportunity for interaction and would welcome the opportunity to meet fellow nutritionists visiting their countries. To do this, it would be necessary to arrange for the exchange of lists of names of travelling nutritionists.

There was also a suggestion that the Society should make more effort to arrange social events in association with its meetings, to give greater opportunity for members to get to know each other and to exchange views.

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