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PREPARATION AND USE OF FOOD-BASED DIETARY GUIDELINES

Report of a
Joint FAO/WHO Consultation



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Nicosia, 2–7 March 1995

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1. Introduction

A Joint FAO/WHO Consultation on the Preparation and Use of Food-based Dietary Guidelines was convened in Nicosia, Cyprus from 2 to 7 March 1995. The meeting was opened by Mr M. Christophides, Minister of Health of Cyprus.

The basic aim of the International Conference on Nutrition, convened by FAO and WHO in Rome in December 1992, was to identify and encourage the use of strategies and actions that improved nutritional well-being and food consumption throughout the world. It adopted the World Declaration and Plan of Action for Nutrition (1), which includes among its goals:

... to make all efforts to eliminate before the end of this decade:

- famine and famine-related deaths;
- starvation and nutritional deficiency diseases in communities affected by natural and man-made disasters;
- iodine and vitamin A deficiencies.

... [and] to reduce substantially within this decade:

- starvation and widespread chronic hunger;
- undernutrition, especially among children, women and the aged;
- other important micronutrient deficiencies, including iron;
- diet-related communicable and noncommunicable diseases;
- social and other impediments to optimal breast-feeding;
- inadequate sanitation and poor hygiene, including unsafe drinking-water.

The Plan of Action includes among its strategies “promoting appropriate diets and healthy lifestyles” and calls on governments, *inter alia*:

on the basis of energy and nutrient recommendations [to] provide advice to the public by disseminating, through the use of mass media and other appropriate means, qualitative and/or quantitative dietary guidelines relevant for different age groups and lifestyles and appropriate for the country's population.

The World Declaration and Plan of Action recognizes that the attainment of its goals requires the development of national action plans appropriate to each cultural context. That is, each country needs to identify public health issues related to local dietary patterns and to adopt local strategies for their resolution. The World Declaration and Plan of Action is notable for the absence of numerical targets for food and nutrient intakes, and thus marks a move in the thinking of

nutritionists away from policies dictated by numbers towards those based on a consideration of the prevailing public health issues. The Plan of Action also calls for the dissemination of nutrition information through “sustainable food-based approaches that encourage dietary diversification through the production and consumption of micronutrient-rich foods, including appropriate traditional foods”.

The overall purpose of the Consultation was therefore to establish the scientific basis for developing and using food-based dietary guidelines (FBDGs) to improve the food consumption patterns and nutritional well-being of individuals and populations. Its specific objectives were: to review the scientific evidence and epidemiology of diet-related health problems, including noncommunicable diseases and other forms of malnutrition; to review the existing literature on recommended nutrient intakes and develop a synthesis of current nutrient recommendations applicable to FBDGs; to review relevant dietary assessment methodologies; to review existing national dietary guidelines and their use in countries; and to make recommendations for the development and implementation of FBDGs.

The concept of disseminating information through FBDGs is inherently sensible, since consumers think in terms of foods rather than of nutrients. Equally, the concept of FBDGs can take account of considerable epidemiological data linking specific food consumption patterns with low incidence of certain diseases, while not requiring a complete understanding of the underlying biological mechanisms. For example, Sir James Lind, the Surgeon-General in charge of health policy for the British Navy in 1700, knew that sailors on long sea voyages did not develop scurvy if the sailors were encouraged to eat limes regularly. This “food-based dietary guideline” successfully addressed a specific health issue in the complete absence of any biochemical understanding. In the modern era, we observe a low incidence of certain diseases in specific communities with particular eating habits and, while we rightfully search for an explanation of biochemical mechanisms, dietary recommendations based on these

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