

Editorial

Images of nutrition

I would like to return to a topic that I mentioned in a previous editorial when commenting on the debate that was going on in the American Institute of Nutrition about whether the word 'Nutrition' was any longer appropriate as a description of the science being undertaken by the members of the AIN. Although I would not wish to belittle the genuine scientific issues that were at the core of the debate, much of the concern arose because it was felt that 'Nutrition' had a rather poor image and that, by inference, the adoption of what the media would see as a higher-profile image would encourage young workers to come into nutrition research as a career. The concept of the need to project a fashionable image in order to gain support or prestige is one that is creeping insidiously into many walks of life at the present time. This may be one consequence of a recession in the advertising industry which is looking for other people or organizations to employ its undoubted skills, or because making judgements has always been difficult in the sciences, and moving towards judging the presentation rather than the content of a piece of work is easier.

I have no quarrel with improving the presentation of a piece of work to increase its impact; in fact much of the Editorial Board's time and that of the Editorial Office is spent doing just that. This is presentation of the image where 'image' is used in the sense of a fair and accurate representation of the original. What does concern me is the presentation of an image that is concerned with appearance or with manipulating the perceptions of those receiving the presentation, because this type of image may be a virtual one and in extreme cases may be a false one.

In the past year we have had two examples where the presentation of research has been tailored to improve its presentational image, which resulted in its misleading those for whom the presentation was prepared.

The thrust of the arguments within the AIN was that the image of nutrition as generally perceived has been weakened by being associated in many people's minds with the current debates on healthy eating and the welter of nutritional advice from all quarters, much of which was based on personal prejudices and often not from a sound scientific base. Most nutritional scientists, although they are concerned with the application of their science in improving health, are also disturbed about the simplistic ways in which complex arguments are presented and that some of the key areas of ignorance where much research should be done are scarcely mentioned. The conviction with which the dietary advice is presented gives many lay people the impression that we know everything about diet and health, whereas I would categorize our current state of understanding as sufficient to realize how ignorant we actually are.

Where should the real image of the nutritional sciences come from? I am very wary of leaving the presentation of our images to the professional image makers. Changing the *British Journal of Nutrition* to a 'glossy' is not the way. I think that our image should come from the quality of the research being done and from improving its presentation, not in an artificial way but by making the scientific literature more accessible, by ensuring that it is clearly written and therefore more readily communicable to the general public, many of whom have had their interest in nutrition whetted by the current diet/health debate.

'Nutrition' is a perfectly good word to describe the study of the effects of diet and its constituents on man and other organisms. As the late Egon Kodicek often remarked, nutrition is distinguished by the questions that the researcher seeks to answer, not by the

techniques being applied. We should capitalize on the range of new techniques at our disposal to answer the key nutritional questions. In the October issue of the *FASEB Journal* the president of the AIN, Professor McCormick, lists the key areas of research that the nutritional sciences should address. These require studies across the spectrum of biological organization from molecules to populations, and it is the integration of this range of experimental studies that makes nutrition an exciting area.

In last week's batch of manuscripts for the *BJN* I read papers that described the nutrition of populations, studies to introduce and validate nutritional education programmes, computer programs to perform nutritional syntheses and construct diets with specified nutrient compositions, studies of the kinetics of amino acid metabolism, the application of stable isotopes to measure energy expenditure in free-living individuals, and two elegant studies using molecular biological techniques to explore the responses to diet; all of these studies addressed the central theme of the nutrition science. I think they project the image of a science that is in tune with modern concepts and techniques, that is making contributions to fundamental scientific knowledge and is contributing to the well-being of mankind. I believe that this is the proper image of nutrition.

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McCormick, D. B. (1991). Nutritional sciences: opportunities with expanding biosciences. *FASEB Journal* **5**, 2753.